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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

BEAUTIFUL GIRLS

BY

PAUL MATWYCHUK

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS.

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Edmonton, Alberta
FALL 1993

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ISBN 0-315-88173-9

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DEGREE: M.A. (English)

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to Winnie

If they asked me, I could write a book

ABSTRACT

Beautiful Girls, written under the guidance of Dr. Greg Hollingshead, is a collection of nine short stories dealing mainly with the mysterious nature of love and the playful delusions that often cloud the human mind. The prevailing tone is seriocomic, especially in such stories as "At Daedalus'," which deals the uniformly unhappy staff members of an apparently rollicking Greek restaurant; "The First Time," in which a teenage boy's first sexual experience turns into an ever-escalating comedy of frustration; and the title story, in which two men imagine what life would be like for them if they were women. The less comical stories include "My Favorite Word," which is written in the disaffected voice of a young black woman recalling her experiences as a fashion model; and "Great With Child," the bizarre story of a fading 1920s Hollywood movie star with an unusual physical defect. Also present in the collection are "I Had A Lovely Accident Today," in which an accident-prone woman tries to make sense of her life while she falls down a flight of stairs; and "The Key to Violet's Apartment," about a woman whose search for the identity of a mysterious intruder into her home leads her unexpectedly on the trail of love.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This collection would be in nowhere near the shape it is now without the tireless and generous assistance of my supervisor, Dr. Greg Hollingshead, who told me which endings didn't work, which characters didn't make sense, which words I'd used three times in one paragraph, which commas should have been semicolons and which should have been omitted altogether; and who made me into a much better writer than I was when I began composing these stories. His incredible patience, perceptiveness, and understanding while advising me on this collection place me greatly in his debt.

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BEAUTIFUL GIRLS

Max and Norm were talking in the living room of Max's apartment. The TV in front of them was muted; the baseball game had been rained out. The two men were seated on either end of a long, low couch. Max, who was enormous, rested on top of a stack of dirty, multicoloured pillows, his legs spread open, easy and wide. Norm was much smaller and thinner than his friend to the point of being almost delicate, and he sat rigidly and politely with his legs together, as if he balked at making himself any more at home. Taped music, the sound of a woman singing high and airy, played softly in the background.

The topic of the men's conversation wandered from this to that, and then Max started them down an interesting avenue. They had been sharing funny game-show stories. There was the contestant on "The Price Is Right" who didn't notice that her breasts had popped out of her tube top while she was running down to Contestants' Row; and the "Wheel of Fortune" player who appeared on "Geraldo" a week later to reveal that she, he, whatever, was a hermaphrodite; and the guy on "Family Feud" who, when asked to name the month when women begin to look pregnant, immediately answered, "September."

And then Max said, "That reminds me of a game show I saw once where they had ten boys in grade five, ten-year-olds. And what they asked them was if they could be a girl for one day, just to see what it was like, would they do it?"

Norm let out a short, nervous laugh. "Go on."

"Well, it turned out that only one of them would admit to be, you know, willing to try it. And when the host asked the group which one it was...Jesus, you could tell from the looks the other boys gave him when he raised his hand that he'd be beaten up on the playground for the rest of his life."

Norm laughed again. It seemed like the end of the story and he reached for his drink on the coffee table. But Max went on speaking.

"I'll tell you, though, my heart really went out to him," he said, almost fondly. "Sincerely, because, I mean, well, wouldn't you want to? Just for the experience?"

"Well..."

"Oh, come on! I think the kid was just being honest! Who wouldn't want to

find out?"

"I guess."

Max seemed disappointed at Norm's lack of enthusiasm. "What--wouldn't you?"

"Be a girl?" Norm tried to think of another funny game show story, but the "Family Feud" anecdote was his last one.

"Just for a day." Max smiled and stroked his beard. "One magical day."

Norm took a long, slow swallow from his beer, trying to appear as if he were carefully considering the question.

"Well?" Max asked, a note of impatience in his voice.

Norm felt himself getting defensive. "I don't know. Would you?" He looked across the couch at Max. Max's shirt was coming untucked at the side, exposing a white, slightly hairy ellipse of skin. His hair was starting to curl into wings around the edge of his baseball cap. He looked so foolishly masculine that Norm thought Max would have to answer no, and that the conversation could end.

But Max only sat grinning on the other end of the couch, his hands drawing curvy figures in the air. "I would," Max said. "Like that." He snapped his fingers.

Norm was dumbfounded.

"Who wouldn't?" Max continued. "Don't you think that would be the greatest opportunity of your life? I mean, My God!" Max seemed so incredulous that anyone wouldn't immediately seize such a tantalizing opportunity that Norm found himself wondering if the desire could be completely natural after all, and entirely

acceptable. "Be honest with yourself," Max said. "Wouldn't you?"

Norm spread his legs out a bit wider. He would go along with it, he supposed. He would humour Max. He shrugged his shoulders as if he had meant to agree all along. "I don't know," he said. "Sure, I guess so."

"You guess? You know you would!" Max said. "In a second!"

Norm thought that was the end of it, but then Max shifted his position on the couch. No longer was he lying back; he was hunched over, facing Norm head-on. Then he turned off the TV with the remote. More was coming, obviously.

Max spoke in a deeper voice than usual. "Now then, listen, what do you suppose you'd look like?"

Norm rolled his eyes. "Oh, for crying out loud, Max, I don't know!"

"Well, you're not just going to look like yourself with breasts and longer hair! What kind of a woman do you think you'd be?"

Norm laughed. "What, I get to choose?"

"Sure!" He made an expansive gesture with his arm that seemed to include the entire world. "Whatever your heart desires."

"My heart's desire," Norm said. The phrase seemed to resonate within him. He actually felt something leap inside his chest, as if some organ were kicking into action.

"Yeah," said Max, scratching briefly and absently between his legs. "Now, first off, are you going to be tall?"

"Uhhh..." Norm tried to imagine a comfortable height. "I guess...five-nine,

five-ten." He shook his head, as if to ask can you believe what we're doing? And yet, an image, a female image, had begun forming in his mind.

"Okay...colour of hair?" Max wondered.

"Hey, wait a minute!" Norm said. "What about you? You've got to choose too!"

"Okay," said Max immediately. "I'll be five-six." Max was something like six foot three, a huge man, a strong man, and Norm paused for a moment to wonder why he wanted to be so much shorter. "Hair colour?" Max asked, and Norm realized suddenly that he would be a full head taller than Max. Norm thought he could feel himself growing.

"Oh, I like blondes," Norm said. "I think I'd like to be a blonde."

"Long hair?"

Norm considered for a moment. "Uh, down to my shoulders, I guess. You?"

"So you can tie it back if you want, huh? I'll be a redhead. Either very short hair, almost a crewcut, you know, like those arty girls like to wear it, or else in a sort of a..." Max made motions with his hands. "What do you call this, where it's straight down to the cheekbones? Is that a pageboy?"

Norm didn't know. "Call it a pageboy. Okay...eyes?"

"Blue."

"Yeah, me too. Or maybe green. No, blue. Okay..." Norm could see Max watching him even more closely than before. The tape player thudded somewhere behind his head as the music ended and the room was suddenly quiet.

"Moving down now," said Max with an air of enormous significance, "what about the breasts?"

Norm had talked about breasts with Max many times before--in fact, they'd been talking pretty animatedly about them just an hour ago--but this was the first time he remembered himself blushing when the subject came up. Breasts...he wasn't sure if he wanted breasts at all. And yet--he'd need them.

"Come on," Max said. "This is one of the easier ones."

"I'm thinking!" Norm answered. "What kind do you want to have?"

"I think I would want a small bust. "Thirty, thirty-one inches at the most."

Norm nodded. He wondered how many breasts he had seen in his life, different breasts...He guessed he was hoping that a pair he liked and would want to claim for his own would come trundling down the line. He began counting them: Carol, that was two; Penelope, that was another two; Violet, Mary, Deborah, Tammy, two, two, two, two. He placed them back into his memory like animals being loaded onto the ark. Which ones would he choose? Which ones did he want to make his own? He imagined trying them on, each pair, what he could remember of them. From Penelope's, so enormous, to Deborah's, barely there at all. Which were his favourites? Which choice would satisfy Max?

"Thirty-six inches," he said. It was a throwaway answer, and yet, as soon as he said it, the female image he had in his mind seemed to complete itself and enter him. He saw her legs and her face and her long, naked body, and she seemed completely part of himself, even the breasts, and he thought for a moment he could

feel their weight pulling down on his chest.

"All that thinking for thirty-six inches? Okay...let's see..." Max leaned his head back and closed his eyes as if to help himself gain a clearer picture of the new, female Norm. "What sort of figure would you want to have? Thin or fat...?"

Norm didn't need to think long anymore. "Oh, thin, I think."

"Sure," Max said, nodding. "No one wants to be fat, do they? Now, are you talking an athletic tone or what, here?"

Norm surprised himself with his answer. He said he didn't want to be too athletic. He was picturing his old girlfriend Violet's arms when he said it. They were still marvels to him; there wasn't a bit of fattiness on them, and they didn't look weak, and yet they weren't skinny, either, or bumpy and muscular. They were perfect and delicate; they didn't seem to have a single bone inside them. He began describing the rest of his female body without even waiting for Max's questions to prompt him. "I think that's what I would like...I wouldn't want to be fat, but I'd like there to be a kind of roundness to everything. That kind of natural thinness, you know? That just stays there without your having to exercise or watch what you eat, I've always liked that, it seems very appealing to me..."

Norm was speaking very quietly, and barely noticed that Max was talking just under his breath as well. He was saying, "Me, I'd want a kind of an athletic build. I'd want to be one of those short, lean, you know, <u>capable</u> girls with the pale skin and the dark glasses, wearing black, very aware and just a little bit dangerous-looking. I don't know what else I'd wear. What do you think, Norm? What would

you wear?"

Norm heard him almost subconsciously. "I don't know," he said. He didn't know much about women's clothes, what the names of all the various articles were, but he'd seen them in the street and he starting wondering what combinations would flatter him most. He pictured himself as a woman, taller than normal, blonde, blue-eyed, soft, full breasts, a wide mouth, a friendly smile. What did a skirt feel like to wear? Or, he'd always liked those dresses that seemed to be popular nowadays, the ones that ended in a shortish miniskirt-midiskirt but weren't tight and had colourful patterns on them. A girl in that R.E.M. video wore a black one with daisies all over it. Holy smokes, it seemed so easy for him to imagine himself as a woman, and he wondered why he'd been so reluctant to start playing the game in the first place. There was no shame, no embarrassment, as there would be in a transvestite fantasy, because he wouldn't be a transvestite at all, he'd be a woman through and through, and for only a day or two at the most. He felt free, free, free! Let's see now...he'd need black shoes, that's what he would wear, flats because he would be so tall, and he wasn't sure if he'd be able to move gracefully enough in heels. And what would he wear to sleep at night? He couldn't decide between a nightgown, satin and lace and a delicate hem because why not go all the way with the experience; or a pair of oversize men's pyjamas, because he'd always found it so incredibly sexy when the women he knew put on a pair of them...Would he be able to sleep at all?

"Hello?" Norm's wife Carol had come into the entranceway. "Anybody in?"

Norm sat up quickly and opened his eyes. Both he and Max had wound up

next to each other, leaning far back on the couch and looking up at the ceiling like a pair of astronauts. "We're right in here, honey." Max opened his eyes when he heard Carol behind him.

Carol came into the room on an angle, slouching to one side with the weight of a heavy plastic bag. "Game over?" she asked Norm as she put it on the floor.

"Never started," Norm said, reluctantly getting up. "Rain." He found himself speaking in clipped, simple sentences, like Ernest Hemingway.

Neither of the men were offering any more information. "Well," said Carol happily, lifting up the bag for Norm to see. "I did some shopping!"

"Oh!" Norm noticed he sounded surprised, as if he never realized women did such things. "Good, good." There were a few moments of silence, and then Norm spoke up again. "Guess we're done here, eh, Max?"

Max made a distracted grunt.

"Be seeing you, then," Norm said, and Max gave him an almost military salute as they left the apartment.

Norm reached for Carol's bag as they walked to the elevator. "Here, let me get that for you."

"Strongman," Carol joked. Norm tried to laugh with her, but the bag's handle was cutting so deeply into the palm of his hand that he knew it sounded forced.

Norm drove home with Carol. It was getting dark early, and they were travelling down a long, straight street; the way the streetlights' reflections kept

streaking up the car windshield had an almost hypnotizing effect on him. Carol was telling him about her adventures that day in the mall, and luckily no more was required out of him than the occasional prompting question: "Uh-huh?" "Mm?" "Yeah?"

They stopped at a traffic light, and a teenaged girl in a prom dress crossed the street in front of them. Her dress was a deep royal blue and her shoes had been dyed to match it. There was a white and pink corsage around her wrist and a locket shaped like a swollen silvery heart on a thin chain around her neck. It was cold out and the girl had no coat on, and Norm watched her as she ran across the street to a downtown hotel, wondering how cold she was, if the soft hairs on her arms were standing on end and prickling. Some of her friends were waiting there for her inside the door. Norm missed the light turning green, he thought she was so young and beautiful.

"Green, honey," Carol said, and he drove on.

"So," Carol said after a pause. "What were you and Max talking about before I came in?"

"Oh, nothing," he said. He drove another block, and then said, "Well, we'd just started talking...well, Max started talking about if you could be a woman for a day or two, just to see what it was like, if you'd do it."

Carol laughed. "A day or two? You'd have to spend at least a <u>month</u> as a woman to really see what it's like."

Norm marvelled at her comment. A whole month? What would he do with

a whole month as a woman? He'd have to buy an entire wardrobe if it was going to last that long. He pictured himself going to all the stores, entering the women's change rooms with armloads of outfits, trying all of them on. A month! For some reason, he imagined Carol completely out of his new life. He saw himself renting a different apartment, somewhere near a river, even though there wasn't a river anywhere near where he was living now. A room with bare wooden floors, cool against his bare feet in the morning. He didn't even imagine himself having a job. Instead, he found himself wondering if he would meet anyone in that month. He wondered if he would meet a man, if he would actually go out with a man. Or would he just naturally gravitate towards women again? He wondered if maybe he'd look up Max, short, redheaded Max with the athletic build and the tiny bust, and if maybe something would happen between them. What would <u>that</u> feel like? And suddenly, he had no idea. He drove the car absent-mindedly, every once in a while looking surreptitiously at Carol sitting beside him, her knees close together, her smooth, bare legs crossed at the ankles. He didn't know what it would feel like. He wanted nothing to do with men the way he was now, but if he thought of himself in that female body, suddenly it didn't seem to matter whether it was a man or a woman he got himself entangled with. All he knew was that he thought it would be incredibly different.

That night, Norm and Carol made love.

In the middle of the night, Norm was still awake. He listened to his wife's

shallow breathing and rolled over onto his side to be closer to it. He listened for several minutes. The thin covers moved up and down with each breath she took. Soon, quietly, he reached under the T-shirt she was wearing, and put his hand on her breast, stroking it idly, rolling the nipple between his fingers, feeling the breast rise and fall, infinitely mysterious and soft and shapeless, beneath his hand.

Soon she rolled over, with a little moan, to kiss him, but Norm could not be sure if she was fully awake yet or not. She put her arms around him, and she made her noises of pleasure, but her eyes were still closed and she moved with the underwater slowness of a dreamer.

Norm had never thought of his wife as mysterious before, and in fact, he had married her partly because she seemed so knowable and reliable and trustworthy. But now, as he moved on top of her and bit at her neck and ears, he wondered. Carol still had her eyes closed but she was moving below him, in cooperation with him, and she had a wide, almost liquid smile of pleasure across her face. He was as excited as ever, Norm thought to himself, but as excited as he was, he realized he was still able to think clearly and straight. Carol had locked her legs around his back now, and Norm thought as he looked at her sleeper's face and her smile with one tooth biting into it that she looked like she was going almost insane from pleasure. There seemed to be no drawbacks, nothing undesirable at all in the world of women, he thought to himself over and over again, nothing that wasn't wonderfully, wonderfully different.

I HAD A LOVELY ACCIDENT TODAY

Lynette, a small, thin, unmuscular woman with dirty blonde hair and eyes like those of a frightened mouse, lived her entire life as a series of accidents and unfortunate mishaps. Another happened last Sunday when she lost her balance as she walked along the upstairs hallway of her house, leaned too far to the right, reached to grab a banister, missed it, and fell all the way down the stairs. She had been holding a stack of cleaned and ironed clothes and these flew into the air as she flailed for a handhold. She got a good look at the stairs just before she fell: there were two dozen of them, all made of bare, highly polished hardwood. The first few

steps rounded a curve, but she couldn't get her bearings in time to use the curve to slow herself down. She sailed right round it, headfirst, like a skin diver. There weren't even any posts along the sides she could grab onto, and she realized even before she hit the first of the stairs that she was going to tumble like a toy all the way down to the bottom and had almost no chance of being able to stop.

The cause for her fall could be traced all the way back to when Lynette was only five years old. It was a rainy June day and she had been sitting at the kitchen table, kneeling on a chair, a pack of crayons in front of her. She was drawing a picture of...What had it been? Lynette asked herself as she hit the first step. And then it came back to her: a moose, because she had tried to give herself a pair of antlers like the moose in her picture, and since the crayons wouldn't stick to her forehead, she stuck one into her ear. But to her horror, the hole turned out to be far bigger than she had anticipated. The crayon slid right inside, like a cartridge, and there was nothing she could do to get it back out. Her pudgy fingers only pushed it farther and farther inside her ear. Shaking her head didn't dislodge a thing, and in a panic she ran upstairs to her parents' bedroom, stole a pair of her mother's tweezers, and tried digging the crayon out. She was only five, though, and her coordination was hardly up to the job. The tweezers were dragging painfully along the lining inside her ear, and she decided to stop. But what was she going to do? Her mother had been in a frighteningly bad mood all that week and had spanked her twice already. Lynette was at the point where she was terrified of having her mother even look at her. She had been pretending her mother's line of sight was an invisible

beam that would kill her if she crossed it, and she had kept ducking under beds and running from rooms as soon as she heard her mother's sinister footsteps approaching. Lynette's left knee collided painfully with the second stair--it caught her just below the kneecap--and she remembered how she had fearfully decided not to tell her mother a thing. She wouldn't even tell her father, even though he was always nice to her, for fear that in an unguarded moment he might unwittingly disclose her secret.

And so she grew up with a crayon stuck deep inside her head. She turned six, then seven, then eight, and she became accustomed to having impaired hearing. In fact, her left ear grew much more sensitive in compensation, and the combination of exceptionally clear hearing on one side and the muffle she always heard on the other became a natural disorder in Lynette's life. She felt happier, somehow, knowing the crayon was there. It was like a talisman. By the time Lynette turned twelve, the crayon had acquired a mysterious, deeply symbolic meaning for her, as if it were representative of a long-buried secret or some crime she'd committed in the past. She had come to think of it as always having been there, from the moment of her birth, until that autumn when her family moved, and during the checkup with their new doctor the crayon was discovered. "My God," the doctor had exclaimed with alarm. "How long has it been in there?" And when Lynette told him, he did everything but cross himself. "We'll have to take it out," he said with a plaintive urgency in his voice. "Good Lord, why didn't you tell anyone?"

There was no way to remove the crayon except through surgery. The doctors

assured the family, with straight faces, that the operation was a routine one. But complications did develop. She had stuck the crayon inside when she was five-that was seven long, eventful years ago, and her ear had actually grown around it, it had actually made the crayon part of her body. The doctors took it out anyway, and they mutilated her ear in the process. Lynette came out of the operation all right, except with a ruined sense of balance. The doctors had punctured something, or torn something else to pieces, so that Lynette, who used to take ballet lessons and play volleyball for the school team, emerged from the hospital as an extraordinarily clumsy little girl. She wobbled when she walked, so that she was always knocking precious objects off tables, and spilling glasses of water down strangers' shirtfronts. She sometimes cried herself to sleep over the injustice of it all. She had never been graceful, she used to remind herself, but look at me now. Lynette returned to those thoughts as she tumbled around the curve of the staircase. She thought, "Who would ever want to trade their position for mine?"

The first time that Lynette had ever fallen down the stairs was when she was eight years old. That was in their old house, and she had been playing dress-up with a weasel-faced little friend of hers named Nancy. The two of them found Lynette's mother's old wedding gown in the attic, and Lynette immediately changed into it and began modelling it around the cramped and musty room like a glamour queen. Soon, Nancy wanted to try too, but Lynette refused to let her have a turn. She would not remove the dress, not even the gloves or the veil. Nancy started to grab at Lynette's sleeves and Lynette, terrified both of having the gown taken from her

and of seeing the fabric torn, ran away. She raced downstairs, hoping to get downstairs or outside, but her feet became tangled in the dress' long, lacy train. She tripped on the top stair and concussed herself during the bumpy ride to the bottom.

And that was when she still had her balance. When Lynette was twenty-one and married for real, she caused a spectacle during the ceremony. As she walked toward the priest and David, her husband, at the front of the church, her mind started swimming. She lost her bearings and cut an embarrassing zigzag path, like a drunk's, all the way down the aisle. She could have cried from embarrassment, for she imagined she had spoiled everything and maybe jinxed her marriage besides. Now she was thirty, she said to herself as she fell past one of the shirts she had been carrying before she fell. Had she progressed at all? She looked at the shirt and saw how creased it now was. She was going to have to pick it up and iron it and fold it up one more time; she was going to have to start all over again.

David and Lynette had met in high school. They were high school sweethearts. David had told her a lovely thing years later, the night he asked her to marry him. He said he wasn't very smart. When teachers handed out new assignments, it was all he could do to keep his head above water, he could barely keep all the information straight in his mind. He told Lynette that the only time he felt he had ever experienced a flash of genius, in fact, was the first time he ever saw her. He was taking the long route to his next class when he saw her inching her way along the corridor. One of her legs was in a cast and she was clinging gingerly onto the wall as she shuffled along. He thought it was a sign of genius that he was the

only person he knew who had seen how pretty she was, and when he said to himself that she looked like a helpless bird, he thought he had the soul of a poet.

Lynette had broken her leg the previous weekend helping her father and her brother, Harmon, repair their roof. Her mother had come into the backyard with a camera and tried to get a picture of the three of them together. She loved the image of her family on top of her roof, but she couldn't get Lynette into the frame. She kept asking her to come closer to the edge. The falling Lynette recalled as she somersaulted down the staircase that she had landed somewhere deep inside the garden. Her leg had bent behind her and, appropriately, when they found her, she was near the squash. Her father swore at the trouble Lynette always caused them, and her mother sighed and said they would just have to be patient with her. Then they rushed her to the family doctor, who clucked his tongue disapprovingly while he set her leg in a cast and seemed unwilling even to supply her with so much as a pair of crutches. "When will you learn, Lynette?" the doctor sighed. "When will you ever learn?" Two days later, when David approached her at school and asked, "Do you need any help?" it was the very thing she had wanted to hear. She enthusiastically said yes, and he walked her to her next class, holding her books while she steadied herself against him.

The falling Lynette was halfway down the stairs and hadn't broken a thing yet, but what she marvelled at was how little it had taken for her to start loving David. It was as if she had walked by mistake into a swimming pool with her clothes on and had suddenly gotten drenched. David had said the magic words. They didn't get

married until four years later, but David and Lynette always bragged to their friends that their beginning carried so much momentum within it that a happy outcome never really seemed in doubt. Long after they were married, Lynette once accidentally knocked David's journal off his desk and read what was on the open page. It was something David had read somewhere and had copied out because it reminded him of the day he met his wife: "This is one of the things about love: that you know that resting in even the most inept among you is the possibility that at any moment, you might miraculously say or do the perfect thing in the presence of your deepest darling, and thereby hold onto him or her forever."

Lynette knew David had certainly found a store of confidence within himself. He would dance her around the room and tell her terrible puns with the careless authority of a man who knew he was loved. But Lynette had been feeling a vague itch in her heart for some time now. As long as they were married, Lynette could feel her love for David trickling away. She used to think about her younger brother Harmon. He had been named after Harmon Killebrew, the legendary home-run hitter from Milwaukee, and Lynette sometimes wondered whether growing up alongside him had done something to her views of what she thought a man should be.

Harmon had been born a month premature, and his mother used to joke that it was as if he couldn't wait to get out into the world and start doing things on his own. Harmon's favourite toys were his building blocks (which he was able to arrange into fantastical Gothic sculptures with towers and marvelous, chasm-spanning

bridges) and his jump-rope (which he played with for four hours every day until, by the time he was eight, his body had been transformed into a compact contraption of wiry muscle). One afternoon, when Lynette was eleven and he was nine, they dared each other to jump out of his bedroom window. He had read library books about martial arts and was able to curl his body into a ball just before he landed and roll away unharmed. As the grown-up Lynette rolled down the stairs, she could still feel traces of the bruises on her bones that the escapade had left her. Harmon had sailed through school as if the classes were ice and he were on skates, and after he finished university he set up his own construction business. It flourished, and the enterprise expanded as far as the other side of the country. Lynette still got long-distance telephone calls from Harmon, and the last time they spoke he announced he was about to purchase his own NASL soccer franchise. Harmon's boat once sank in the middle of a remote Northern lake and he swam to safety in half the time it took everybody else. He used to visit Lynette whenever she was in the hospital no matter where in the world he was and bring her exotic presents.

Lynette was positive that the secret to Harmon's success was luck. If he had been born the time he was supposed to be, he would have been as ordinary as anyone else. He would have gotten through school by the skin of his teeth, settled down in the city he'd been raised in, and found a lovely girl to marry. He would have had a happy life, Lynette told herself, but he'd sneaked out a month early, and a lucky star had shone through the window when he did. You just never knew what you'd fall into. Harmon was a diver when he went to high school, a blond, medal-

winning diver, and Lynette was tumbling upside-down past another of her shirts when she remarked to herself how appropriate a sport that had been. And what was she supposed to think of David after that? She could picture David falling out a window like her or Harmon, and though he might survive, he would probably never get near one again. Once, he was playing tetherball with their son, Nick, in the backyard when he twisted his ankle. It was twenty minutes before he could stop his eyes watering and get up off the ground.

Oh, she could have done so much better than David, Lynette thought, gritting her teeth with bitter regret, and as she saw that there were only seven more steps to go before she hit the bottom, she tried to make a quick list before time ran out, a list of all the men she should have chosen instead. Top among them was Tony Patterson, who was a tall, dark-haired Irish boy she had become intimate friends with while she was young and in the sixth grade. She missed a lot of school while she was in the hospital undergoing her ear surgery and Tony had been the boy Mrs. Rettig chose to deliver her homework. The hospital was right on Tony's way home, and he didn't seem to mind one bit having to make the long haul to the children's ward. In fact, he often stayed to talk with her and explain to her the work she didn't quite understand. He was always asking her how her ear felt, if she was in any pain, and if he could get the nurse to give her anything. Lynette had heard he grew up to become a nurse himself. If his family hadn't moved to Victoria so soon after she got out of the hospital, she might be married to him today.

And then there was another man, named Eric Markham, or Markman, who

she met at the funeral of a distant, distant aunt of hers, so distant Lynette could not remember the last time she'd seen her. Harmon had attended, and Eric turned out to be one of Harmon's partners--they called each other "teammates" and acted as though they had known each other for years. Eric had spoken alone to Lynette for several minutes that night, offering his condolences, but Lynette sensed there was something more to his comments than that. He seemed to be veiling his meanings from her and she suspected he was flirting. But she never got another moment alone with him, and when she heard that Eric had outmaneuvered Harmon in a sneaky little business deal she mentally cursed herself for never having pursued the matter further. Then there was a series of faces she had trouble putting names to. But finally there came the one Lynette remembered the most.

Three years ago, she and David had been invited to a party being held by her old friend Nancy to celebrate her mother's remarriage. Nancy had married very well and her house was packed with so many friends it was almost showoffy. Lynette and David had become separated very early in the evening and Lynette found herself at one o'clock in the morning wanting very much to leave and go back home. But she couldn't find David anywhere, and as she searched one of the back corridors near the bedrooms for him, she ran into a stranger. He had a thick moustache, thick, curly hair, and a dark, wood-like colour to his skin, so that he looked subtly Arabic and exotic. They had never seen each other before, but his courtly manners put Lynette almost immediately at ease.

"I saw you earlier," he said, "and you looked like you were trying to find

someone." Lynette said that he was right, and she was still looking. The stranger said his name was Alex, and he was a friend of Nancy's husband. Lynette was intoxicated by him. She had been drinking far more that night than she normally did, but her head felt remarkably clear. She could see every movement Alex made for what it was, she thought. She could see the poise and the emotion that went into everything he said. They were talking about their children and their spouses, but Lynette was imagining Alex taking neck-breaking falls off skyscrapers and tumbles from the wings of airplanes. They talked for five minutes before Alex said he had to excuse himself. Lynette felt a sudden alarm rise within her. She thought she owed him something for his time and she couldn't think of what. And then she remembered what a courtly appearance he had struck when she first laid eyes on him, and when he told her goodbye, she took his hand in hers and found herself kissing it as if she were Cinderella's prince.

She hadn't meant to do that at all, she told herself as David drove her home. No, it was as if she had slipped or fallen. Maybe she did have too much to drink. During the car ride home, she was racked with terrific guilt over her action. But there was something calming about the situation as well. People she knew tended to make the same comment about her: that she always seemed to be recovering from injuries or getting hurt somehow. But when Lynette looked back on her life, on everything that had happened to her, what struck her most were the interminable gaps that lay like valleys between the accidents. Sometimes she would spend an entire year and a half between injuries, but the injuries were what people always

seemed to remember: the time she fractured her elbow, the time she sprained her finger in the hinges of a door, the time she cut open her hand while carving a turkey. All Lynette herself thought back to, though, were the years of dead time she had spent, the times when she was moving all about the house but when nothing was happening, when she found herself tensing up as if expecting wonderful surprises around every corner. But she knew she could barely keep her balance as she walked, and that it would only be a matter of time before she knocked her head on a doorway or fell from the top of a stepladder. Or, yes, took a spill down the stairs. She used to be so cowardly when she was little, Lynette remembered. She never left the house after dark. Other children would only have to raise their fist and she would hand them over every cent she had on her. When wild animals appeared on the television screen she would have to run into another room. How far I've come, Lynette thought proudly as she hit the final step. She had procured herself a secret long ago that night with Alex, she imagined it as a perfect pearl in a secret box, and when she hit the ground at the foot of the stairs, she landed exactly the way she had wanted to--on her back, with her legs splayed out like branches--and she felt like she was in perfect control.

MOLLY BLOOM

One rainy afternoon, Professor Himes was teaching his afternoon Irish Literature course. He had twenty-three students, but to his displeasure only fourteen had shown up for class. That the book was Ulysses probably explained it. Still, he interpreted the poor attendance as an insult to himself and not Joyce, and he delivered the lecture with a certain degree of snippiness and resentment.

Himes had brought along a map of Old Dublin and an overhead projector. He was paying so much attention to the map, and the room was so dark, that the class was half over before he noticed anything was wrong. He had looked up from

the projector to explain one of Joyce's obscure puns when he noticed a student who didn't seem to be paying attention. She was a tall girl with very, very short hair. The girl was virtually bald. She wore round, wire-rimmed glasses and long, fancy, golden earrings which dangled down past her long, strong chin. The girl had looked up only once in the last five minutes, and that had been a dull-eyed, cursory glance at best. She seemed inordinately interested in her notebook. Himes went back to the map, but he had taken note of her.

"...The choice of the name 'Molly' for Bloom's wife is an interesting one. The word has a dual significance. On the one hand, it has the connotation of softness, as in the Latin word 'mollis,' 'soft.' This meaning turns up even today in words such as mollify and mollycoddle. On the other hand, 'Molly' carries opposite, less ideal associations, as with a gangster's moll, or the fictional thief Moll Flanders. In fact, 'Molly' has the same origin as 'mollusc,' a creature hard on the outside yet soft on the inside..."

Himes finally remembered the girl's name: it was Janice, Janice Thompson. He continued to observe her surreptitiously, just to see if his suspicions of inattention were correct. And sure enough, the girl's hand movements were definitely not those of a note-taker. Her hand seemed to be lingering over the same area of the paper, a corner that wasn't even ruled. Her pen was making shapes, not letters and sentences. Himes knew the girl was drawing.

"...Perhaps Molly's name provides us with a point from which we can begin profitably to examine her character. Which facet of her name is she most

representative of? Or is she a combination of both?"

Janice was sitting at an odd, uncomfortable angle, hunched slightly over her page, and had made a partial shield in front of the drawing with her free hand.

"Janice?"

The girl looked up from her page. Himes saw her glance briefly at the person seated beside her, as if to ask for assistance. "Yes sir?" Himes insisted on being referred to as "Sir."

"Please pay attention."

Himes was going to leave it at that, but the girl, unexpectedly, made a reply. "What?" she said. "I'm paying attention." She almost sounded indignant.

Himes made an involuntary noise of surprise at her nerve, but recovered quickly. "Were you? Come now, I could see you drawing."

She sank back a bit into her chair, as if to concede the point. As she did so, however, she muttered a comment that she probably meant for herself alone to hear. But she was sighing, and that additional gust of breath made her comment loud enough for even Himes to hear it: "I just don't see--"

Himes leapt on her. "Pardon me?"

"Nothing."

"I'm sorry. I'm sure you said something. What is it you don't see?" Himes thought she was complaining about his chastising her in public, but to his surprise, she took issue with his lecture.

"I was just saying that I don't see how you can get all that out of her name.

Mollycoddle. Mollusc. That's why he named her Molly? How can you analyze it like that? I mean, maybe he just liked the name. Maybe he actually knew a woman named Molly who inspired the character. Maybe it was completely random and even Joyce didn't know why he called her that." A few classmates laughed quietly. But there was a sound of unease underneath their laughter that seemed to sober Janice up, and she quickly finished her point. "I just don't think it's a very revelant point, is all."

Himes held up his hand. "Hold it. Janice, what did you just say? What was that word you used?"

The girl didn't know what he was talking about.

"'Revelant.' You said 'revelant.'"

Janice remained confused. "Well, yes..."

"The word," Himes said, affecting an impatient tone, "is 'relevant.' Time and again, I read essays from students in this class which contain the same basic mistakes. Writing 'are' when you mean 'our.' I-T-apostrophe-S instead of I-T-S. Confusing 'your,' belonging to you, and 'you're,' the contraction of 'you are.' And it's all because none of you <u>think</u>! Do none of you evaluate the words you're writing? Do none of you read? How many of you have actually gotten around to reading this novel, this novel which I assigned to you at least two months ago?" He waved the heavy book in front of him and then slammed it onto his desk. It made a gratifyingly loud noise.

Something inside Himes had snapped. Half the class missing from this small

room in this God-forsaken university, and the only student to volunteer a comment had done so only to ridicule him--illiterately. Sometimes when he marked papers, a page would contain so many errors that he would be unable to stop circling them. He would try to find as many mistakes as he could, one for every line, even. A mania for correctness seemed to overtake him, and now, for the first time, it had seized hold of him in public, in class. Himes launched into a speech which lasted close to half an hour. Ignorance of punctuation. Awkward, near-illiterate sentence constructions. A refusal even to open half the assigned novels, and an inability to appreciate properly the ones they muddled through and actually finished. And always he returned to Janice, waving at her dismissively, making a point of singling out her mistake, the one that had started the entire speech. Himes felt he could have continued for three hours more, but the bell rang, and so he assigned the class an extra essay, due by the end of the week. He announced he would dock each student half a numerical grade for every error in grammar, spelling, punctuation or usage.

Himes quickly gathered his books and notes and left the classroom ahead of everyone else. Usually he stayed behind, waiting to see if anybody had a question they needed him to answer, but today he knew no one would dare.

A colleague said hello to him as they passed in the hallway, but Himes hardly noticed him. He took one look at all the people waiting to use the elevator and decided to walk the five flights up to his office. His lips were moving slightly. He was remembering various sentences he had used in his tirade to his class, and now

he was saying them again, just under his breath, occasionally changing the word order or the syntax to make them even more effective. He was still quite fit, and the climb hadn't tired him out, but even so, when he finally reached his office, he collapsed into his chair with the exhaustion of an athlete. He toed off his shoes, leaned back, and addressed one dismissive, contemptuous word to the dim afternoon light.

"Revelant!"

Himes closed his eyes, feeling the coolness of the leather beneath his neck. He thought about the word "relevant," the proper word, and what an oddly beautiful word it was. The three liquid sounds, "r" and "l" and "n," all offset by the ripsaw buzz of the "v" and the snap of the closing "t." As he rolled the word around in his brain for a while, he began pondering its etymology. Was it in the same family as the word "relate," or was it an adjectival form of "relief"? He made a bet with himself that he could choose the correct origin. The choice was tricky, since both words had similar root meanings; they both invoked the idea of "carrying." Finally, though, Himes chose "relief" and reached for his dictionary. It was an enormous volume with a raised spine and a leather binding which needed to be treated with a special liquid every six months to keep it from drying out and cracking. Himes always placed it on his knees when he consulted it, never on the desk, so great was his pleasure at the volume's sheer solid weight. He lingered in his search, enjoying the rich crinkle of the thin pages as he turned them. At last, he found the entry for "relevant," and, to his delight, it turned out to have been derived from the same source (the Latin verb

"relevare") as "relief," as in "to bring something into relief."

Himes was about to place the book back on the shelf when the impulse hit him to look up the word "revelant" too. He wanted to see its absence, he wanted to see "revel" and "revelation" and nothing between them. He flipped quickly through the intervening pages, a bit surprised at how much farther into the book he had to go. Within a few moments, Himes arrived at the proper page.

"**Revelant,**" the entry read. "A. Providing information or insight; disclosing (esp. hidden) facts or details; revealing; hence -ANCE, -ANCY n. [ME, f. OF reveler or f. L re(velare f. velum veil)]"

Himes felt for a second as if he were about to vomit. He slammed the book closed. Needing both hands to lift it, he shakily placed it back on the shelf. He felt his body oozing a cold film of perspiration. For a moment, he though he had malaria. Janice's words played back to him, eerily exact: "Your name doesn't have anything to do with your personality. I just don't think it's a very revelant point, is all."

My God, he said to himself, that could have been what she meant. Not that my comment wasn't relevant to our study of the novel, but that when all was said and done, it wasn't revelant, it didn't shed any light on the matter, it didn't reveal anything.

Himes tried to reassure himself that there was no way she could have known the word and used it properly in class, that she had made exactly the stupid mistake he had accused her of. But he found himself crying. Unstoppably. He felt a

sensation like a powerful, hot blow to his stomach and then the salty water pouring down his cheeks and dampening his beard. He squeezed his eyes shut, but the added pressure seemed to make the tears come faster than ever, as if his eyes were a pair of damp and dripping sponges finally being wrung out. He could see himself, from a stranger's viewpoint, alone and crying in his office, his mouth opening and closing without any sound escaping.

This must be what sinners feel like, he thought, when they become converted. He thought about all the things he had said to his class that afternoon. A strutting fool, that's what he'd been. Surely one of them, some smartass, would make a point of looking up "revelant" in the dictionary as soon as he got home. Himes imagined the scene: a handsome boy in a letterman's jacket whispering his discovery in a pretty girl's ear, her looking at him, delighted, astonished, and then the two of them laughing. And suddenly Himes wondered what he was crying for. He still couldn't stop, but he realized he wasn't sure if it was because he was repenting the mere fact of his angry tirade, its lack of justification, his having publicly mocked an innocent girl; or because he feared he had exposed himself as a fool.

Of all the things his mind could have turned to then, how strange it was that he began thinking about Marian, his first girlfriend...he couldn't have been older than seventeen. He had been attracted to her initially because she always used the quaintest cliches when she talked, always with an absolute lack of affectation. "I'm in such a tizzy!" she would say, waving her arms about her head. "Thanks a bundle!" "If I had my druthers..." She liked to say she was "as nervous as a cat on a hot tin

roof" years before the play came out.

During the two months he went out with her, Himes had to put up with a lot of things. She still liked reading Nancy Drew books even though she was sixteen and Himes was already through the collected Conrad and was halfway through Henry James. She thought the best band in the world was the Shep Fields Orchestra, the Rippling Rhythm band. During every song, Fields would blow air through a straw and into water to create a gentle accompaniment of bubble noises. Marian thought this was delightful. Eventually, Himes broke up with her when they had an argument in a movie theatre while they were watching a matinee of Duel in the Sun. Himes wanted to leave, but Marian's stubborn Irish background acted up again, and she wanted to stay. Himes left alone, striding with long legs up the aisle and out into the daylight.

So it was with a great deal of surprise that, years later, decades after they last spoke, Himes discovered that Marian had become a flute player with a famous American orchestra. The orchestra had issued several recordings, and when Himes listened to them he half expected to hear bubbles again. He would strain to pick out the flutes over the heaviness of the brass section, and every so often he thought he could hear Marian in there. Such emotion! Such...maturity! How could that distant musician be the same girl he had dated and rejected some forty years ago?

Marian had always been sentimental, and now Himes found himself thinking sentimentally, too. Himes had never had a wife, but at this moment he had a fleeting image of what their lives might have been like, he and Marian, supposing

they had stayed together, supposing he had been able to control himself and remain in the movie theatre until the lights went up, supposing they had gotten married. He pictured himself at a table, poring over another pile of essays. For the last day or two, he hadn't been paying much attention to Marian, there was so much work to get done. And now Marian was creeping up behind him and was about to surprise him with a kiss. But he sensed her presence, he knew she was there; and when she kissed him, on the nape of the neck, he wheeled around and chased her until they fell onto on the sofa and embraced. Just when Marian thought he would never show emotion or affection again, he would be there for her, just when she needed him most...

Himes felt himself stop crying. He felt the moment when he climbed out of his sorrows, shut off his tears, and returned to his office. But a certain guilty melancholy remained. He stood up and walked over to his bookshelves, looking at the famous names on the spines. What could he do to atone for his actions that afternoon? What could he do that would make those names respect him again?

Maybe he should seek Marian out. Maybe she would remember him and want to start over. Maybe she still loved him!

The thought was so outlandish that it seemed to jar Himes back to normal. He marveled at the things he had been thinking. Just as suddenly as Marian's memory had come to him, the recognition dawned that the idea of seeing her again was foolish, and that even if they were somehow to meet once more, they would surely antagonize each other all over again.

He walked to the washroom down the hall and rinsed his eyes, which were

incredibly red. He looked in the tiny, cracked mirror over the sink and straightened his tie. Well, what else could he do to atone? What if he called up Janice and apologized? Himes rejected that idea as well. He thought of her, looking down in her notebook at the cartoon--probably a caricature of him--her nearly hairless head bobbing in front of him. He refused to give her the satisfaction.

Still, he knew he had to make a gesture, or else he felt he would lose some essential grain of personal integrity. As he walked back to his office, he was able to devise for himself a punishment. There was a faculty meeting later that afternoon. His penalty would be to go there and, during a conversation with some respected colleagues, use the word "irregardless." When his listeners fell silent at his blunder--they would never of course actually correct him on his gaffe--he would have to silently endure the embarrassment. He forbade himself to tell anyone of the reason for his error. He would enjoy secret honour.

Himes walked to the English office to get a cup of coffee. On the way, he passed the doors of several professors' offices. Some were ajar, and he made little nods of greeting to the ones who saw him walk by. Himes knew how his plan would probably work out. He would enter the room early, before the meeting got underway. A group of his friends would already be talking, and a friendly, waving hand would beckon him over. He'd look a bit preoccupied, and someone would ask him what he was thinking about. That would be his opportunity to describe the incident in his class that afternoon, maybe share a joke or two at Janice's expense. Then, they would probably talk a bit about Molly Bloom, and how some scholars had

theories she was a living, breathing woman who had actually existed and had served as Joyce's model. For all her faults, still...to have lived during that time and known the real Molly Bloom!

Then, Himes could slip in his "irregardless." It was such a natural word that it wouldn't be hard to introduce into a sentence without its drawing much attention. Why, in conversation, it and "regardless" sounded virtually alike.

THE FIRST TIME

The timing was all wrong, to begin with. Neil had been going out with Meg for almost six months. He was losing interest in her, fast, but at the same time he was seventeen closing in on eighteen, and it was getting near the point where they should be having sex. They were still officially going out, after all. And he had never done it before in his life.

He had not had many girlfriends before Meg, and none of them had lasted longer than a month or two. Neil knew he was not a big guy with the girls. He was a little bit fat. Getting a steady girlfriend, any steady girlfriend, seemed like a stroke

of luck to him. And it seemed to have taken forever to get this far with Meg. To wait as long, or longer, with some other hypothetical girl would be more than his patience could bear. It would be a year, maybe two, at the very least. He couldn't think of any other possibilities; it would have to be Meg.

He still liked Meg well enough, he supposed. They could always find things to talk about, when they tried. She wasn't the prettiest girl in the school, he knew, but she wasn't too bad, either. When they were out together, he sometimes wished that she knew what to do with her looks and how to dress herself and do her hair better. More exactly, he wished she had a secret trove of beauty that would someday flower for him. He did like it, though, that lately she had been hinting to him how maybe, you know, the two of them should...do it.

The problem was where to do it? Both of them lived at home, of course, and they each had younger brothers and sisters, so their houses were never empty. Neil could get the family car if he asked, but in the car? Come on. The seats didn't even go down.

And then Neil got lucky. An Indian couple who lived down the street from him, the Chandrashekars, were going away on a week's vacation, and they asked Neil if he would mind their house. They wanted him to take in the mail, feed their cats and their fish, and mow their lawn. They were a very friendly couple, and when they presented him with their keys, they smiled and told him he should feel free to make himself at home while they were gone.

The plan formed quickly. Neil and Meg would pretend to go to the movies.

They would give their parents the name of a movie they'd already seen so that if they were asked about it they'd be able to describe it properly. Then they'd sneak down the street and into the Chandrashekars', where they would...you know, do it.

On his own, Neil bought some supplies. He bought a box of twelve condoms and he imagined himself using them all up in one night. He asked a friend to ask his older brother to buy him a bottle of wine at the liquor store. The same day, he got a package of cigarettes from the corner store--du Mauriers. For after. On his way home from school, he stopped by the Chandrashekars' and put the wine in their refrigerator. Then he took an enormous, expensive-looking ashtray he found in the Chandrashekars' den and put it on the night table beside their bed. The base of the ashtray showed two translucent blue elephants rearing, their trunks curling elegantly above their heads. He told himself that this was going to be the greatest, most sophisticated night of his life.

The whole house smelled like mysterious Indian cooking. Everything in the house had the scent of exotic spices, and heat. The first thing Meg did when she got on the Chandrashekars' bed was smell the coverlet. "Mmmmm," she said. She lay across the bed and stretched herself like a cat.

"Don't mess up the sheets," Neil said. He didn't want to get under the covers because he didn't think they would be able to make the bed the same way it was before, and then the Chandrashekars would know what had been going on while they were away. He turned on the radio, hoping to find a station playing some romantic

music. But the dial was tuned to an Indian station, and as soon as he pushed the ON button, a loud, sinuous raga flooded out of the speakers. Neil was about to change the station but decided that maybe this music would do nicely after all. He pulled the blinds down and turned towards Meg and watched her as she stretched one more time. Neil listened to the song and tried to pick up its beat. He tried imagining himself inside a harem. It wasn't hard. He noticed that on Mrs. Chandrashekar's dresser there were several bottles of perfume with Arabic writing on the labels. He closed his eyes and inhaled. He pictured the scents entering him through his nose and mouth, and traveling quickly through his entire body, down to the nethers. Neil reflected on the extra little dose of magic for him, and undid the button on his jeans. He opened his eyes and looked down at himself. Strange, but nothing seemed to be stirring yet.

"Come here," Meg said softly, making the words sound like a purr.

Neil returned her smile and walked over to the bed.

He was only halfway to the bed when the room seemed to lurch a little bit. Meg had hardly drunk any of her wine, but he had emptied his glass very quickly. It made his head feel extremely warm.

He tried to climb up on the bed. He missed his footing the first time and scraped the sole of his foot on a carving of a snake's head along the bottom of the bed. This was the first notice Neil made of it. The carving went around the entire circumference of the bed, and it showed a snake about to devour its own tail. The snake had gigantic ivory fangs.

"Is everything all right?" asked Meg.

"Fine," Neil replied. He performed a gentle leap onto the bed and quickly knelt over Meg. He unbuttoned his shirt and took it off, making a great show of baring his chest. When Meg let out a little laugh, he decided to act as if he had been acting funny all along, and he swung his shirt over his head like a lariat and threw it across the room. He bent down to give Meg a kiss, pausing to let her take off her glasses.

Come on, he said to himself after a few minutes of kissing. What's wrong with me? Nothing's happening. He started unbuttoning Meg's shirt, but he had no idea how much work that was going to be. It was one of those cotton blouses with two dozen buttons running down the front. She had to help him. She put her hand on his and they shoved the buttons through their slots together. Still, it was forever before there was an opening big enough for him to get his hand inside. He put his hand on her breast. She was still wearing her bra. He tried reaching behind her back to unhook it, but it was such an awkward angle.

Meg rolled onto her side, accidentally pinning Neil's arm underneath hers and behind her back. "Neil!" Meg said to him. His arm was inside her blouse almost as far as the elbow. "What are you <u>doing</u>? Here..." She reached behind her back, and in a couple of seconds her bra was off. "Just <u>ask</u>, why don't you?"

They started again. Neil, feeling scolded, reached inside and felt her breast. It was a tremendous disappointment. Somehow, Neil had always supposed they would be firmer, stiffer, more tough and unyielding. Meg's breast felt like a water

balloon.

With renewed determination, he began kissing Meg even more ferociously than before. At the same time, he moved his free hand up and down her legs. He tried to linger on their softness. She had such bad legs, why did she wear shorts? She looked so dumpy. Maybe that was the problem. He closed his eyes and tried to imagine Meg with beautiful legs. He had read a book that described its heroine as having "legs that seemed to begin at her shoulders." He couldn't visualize that. He leaned back onto the bed as Meg kissed his neck and moved her hand slowly up his leg. He concentrated on Meg's weight on top of him, and tried imagining her as an entirely different girl. Another girl from school? He pretended it was Barbara kissing his neck. But nothing happened. Neil rolled over and straddled one of Meg's legs, rubbing himself against it. He guessed he wasn't as crazy about Barbara as he thought.

Neil now had a feeling like a bubble of panic popping inside his stomach. He worried that he had drunk too much wine and had somehow damaged himself. What could he do to fix things? Maybe if she was a famous woman. Neil waited until Meg had taken off her shirt herself. He then began another furious barrage of kisses about her ears, mouth, and throat. Ellen Barkin? Neil tried making little groans of pleasure, hoping he could induce Meg into making them too. She didn't catch on, though, and after a minute or so, he stopped. Uma Thurman? He felt Meg tentatively nibbling at his earlobe. The sensation was faintly repulsive to him. Winona Ryder? He tried putting his hand down Meg's shorts but got snagged on a

thread inside and tore a cuticle.

"Just a second," he told Meg. He got off the bed and hurried to the radio. "Is this music getting on your nerves, too?" he asked. He turned the power off, and the room was suddenly, eerily quiet. There! What a distraction that music was! he remarked to himself. No wonder nothing was happening! He unzipped his pants with one quick, hard movement, giving the action an air of grit and finality. As he walked back to the bed, now completely naked, he found himself looking at the picture hanging over the bed. It was a stylized Indian drawing of a couple underneath a tree in some kind of forest or garden. The man, Neil noticed, was on top of the woman. It was an erotic drawing! Except that the colours in the drawing were all wrong. The grass was yellow and the couple was coloured a deep, murky red. Neil became newly aware of the fact that they were in the Chandrashekars' bed, the bed where they made love probably every night, where they had conceived their two children. Neil gave his testicles a quick juggle. The room seemed to him now to be full of invisible, erotic ghosts, and he felt re-inspired by them. Maybe the spirits of the dead could help him out somehow.

Neil took a perfume bottle from the dresser and got on top of Meg one more time. "Here we go for real," he whispered to her, and shoved all the pillows onto the floor. He put some perfume onto his finger and painted a perfumed "X" across her chest. Meg smiled at that, but when Neil tried to place the perfume bottle on the dresser, he lost his balance and spilled half the bottle across the dresser and the carpet.

"Neil! Oh my God!" Meg tried to get out of the bed, but Neil said, "No. Don't worry about it." Meg protested, but Neil was so insistent that everything was all right she finally relented. He kissed her breast and began sucking avidly at the nipple. Neil felt like screaming--would nothing get him started? The room was filling up with a heavy, musky perfume smell. He could feel it clouding his head.

Neil began stroking Meg and kissing her again, hoping to occupy her while he unfastened the top button of her shorts. After only a little bit of fiddling, it was open. What moves! He slid down the zipper, and the teeth parted with a faint but glorious "Zzzzzzzzt!" noise. Meg lifted her waist off the bed and Neil's heart soared when she let him pull her shorts off. They came off so smoothly they hardly seemed to touch her on the way down. Now she was naked and Neil was in position above her. He inhaled deeply from the haze of perfume swirling about the room. Still nothing. Come on! Come on! What the hell was wrong with him?

Suddenly, he thought of a tactic that might help him. "Listen," he whispered into her ear. "The tub has a shower."

Meg sighed, but she agreed.

"It'll be great," he assured her.

As Neil and Meg walked from the bedroom to the bathroom, the Chandrashekars' two cats appeared. They were not playful cats but the kind that look eternally wise and superior. They both had deep green eyes that seemed lit from some hidden source deep inside their skulls. The larger one, which Neil assumed was the male, sat on a small knickknack table in the hallway. The other,

the female, crouched beneath it. The hallway lights were off, but Neil could still see their eyes, which looked at him with such an appearance of intelligence that Neil suspected instantly that they knew exactly what was going on between him and Meg. "Go on!" Neil hissed at the female. "Get out of here!" She hissed back at him and ran downstairs. After a couple of seconds, the male hopped casually down from the table and followed after her.

Once in the tub, Neil knelt down to adjust the taps to the proper temperature and then stood up and put his arms around Meg. The water felt good on his back. The Chandrashekars had one of those shower heads that pulsed out the water in steady bursts, to give you a kind of massaging effect. Neil imagined that this must be a very erotic feeling. They stood for a while, their feet sloshing around the water in the tub, but it was clumsy and cramped. They were leaning quite heavily against the shower door, and Neil could not to stop worrying about the possibility of its popping out of its tracks and shattering on the floor.

Meg agreed after a few minutes of this to lie down in the tub. A sponge fell off a ledge and blocked the drain. Water kept getting sloshed around, and unexpected splashes went up Neil's nose. It wasn't long, either, before Meg said she was starting to feel slimy.

"Okay, forget this idea," Neil said and turned off the taps. There must have been a note of anger in his voice because Meg asked, "Is everything all right?"

Neil didn't answer. He had noticed a bottle sitting on the toilet tank. It was decorated with a picture of a lush Indian landscape. A beautiful woman in a sari

was in the foreground, while a dark-skinned, bare-chested man stared at her rapturously from behind a tree. Neil opened the bottle and smelled it. The contents were scented. "Hey!" he said to Meg. "Come here." He tried to squeeze some of the mysterious goo onto his hand, but there was only a handful of the stuff left at the most. Maybe it would be enough.

"Come here." He grabbed Meg's arm and pulled her towards him. She hit her hip on the sink. "Ow!" Neil smeared the oil over Meg's damp back and her breasts and over his chest as well. "Here we go," Neil kept saying to himself. "Here we go."

"Are you all right, Neil?" Meg said. "You're talking awfully fast. What are you trying to do?"

Neil didn't answer. He steered Meg so that she was leaning against the closed bathroom door, contorting the oiled parts of their bodies together. Was nothing going to work? There had been so little oil left in the bottle that their skin had absorbed it almost immediately. Neil felt greasy and unpleasant.

"Neil, what are you doing?"

"Wait--let's try this." Neil ran out of the bathroom, Meg following reluctantly behind him. He stopped inside the Chandrashekars' daughter's bedroom. The bed was tiny and close to the floor. "Here!" Neil cried. "Let's do it here instead!"

"Neil!"

But Neil tossed her onto the bed and barraged her with kisses one more time. He sucked ferociously at her nipples. "Let's do it in the kid's bed!!"

"Neil--the covers!"

Meg squirmed away from Neil and stood by the door. "We're going to mess up the covers. As if we haven't ruined enough of the house already."

Neil's mind raced. He'd really thought that maybe he'd be able to do it in here. Where else was available? Meg seemed to be losing patience. Think, think, think!!

"Okay, wait just a second there," Neil told her, motioning for her to stay calm. "I think I have an idea that just might work."

Neil ran downstairs. He almost broke his neck falling over the Chandrashekars' two cats, who were making noisy, violent love on the kitchen floor. One of them made a gash on Neil's leg before he could scurry away to safety. He watched them from behind the door to the basement stairs. They were spitting and clawing at each other, hitting the garbage disposal, then rolling across the linoleum and smacking against the refrigerator. Nothing seemed able to stop them.

Neil shook his head in wonder as he padded downstairs. He couldn't find rope anywhere. The Chandrashekars didn't have a workroom or even a tool chest. He sighed in frustration, hugging himself against the cold cellar air. Soon he heard Meg calling him from the top of the stairs.

"Neil? Neil? What are you doing down there?"

"I'm looking for something."

"What?"

Suddenly, Neil remembered. He took the stairs two at a time. The cats were

still clawing each other.

"Listen," he said to Meg, but looking at the cats. "I'm just going out to the shed. I think they've got some rope in there. I remember seeing some when I was getting out the lawnmower."

"Rope?" Meg said.

"I'll be right back," Neil assured her, giving her a peck on the cheek. He took a key ring from a hook next to the back door and went out into the backyard. The area was surrounded by high bushes and hedges, and the grass was long and soft. What a warm night it was, the moon so full, the sky a perfect shade of deep violet-blue. It was completely romantic.

Sure enough, inside the shed was a length of rope. It looked almost new. Neil trotted back to the house, the dew cool against his bare feet. His other ideas tonight might have been misguided, Neil told himself, but there was something that felt undeniably correct about this new plan of his. He made a hissing noise between his teeth, like a cat.

He tried to open the back door, but it wouldn't budge. He tried it again, but it was still closed. "Meg!" he called. "Meg!" He knocked on the door a few times, softly at first, but then louder and more insistently. "Meg! Where are you? Don't leave me out here! Don't leave me outside the house!"

Neil peered through the window in the door, to see Meg stomp upstairs. Neil hurried back into the yard. The Chandrashekars' bedroom window was visible if he stood on the edge of the lawn, in front of their garden. He thought he could see the

silhouette of her naked body through the curtains, but he couldn't be sure. "Meg!" he cried out, but she didn't seem to hear him.

There was a tall pear tree growing beside the house whose highest branches came very close to the bedroom window, and it looked sturdy enough to hold him. In addition, the trunk was smooth enough for injury not to be much of a worry, and there was a low branch that made for an ideal starting rung.

As Neil gripped the trunk, he noticed that the bark had a strange, alien smell wafting from it. It was like incense, rich and almost smoky. He smelled a nearby leaf and found that it contained the scent as well. A wind blew through the tree, and all the branches and leaves made a sympathetic rustling sound, like crisp bedsheets being unfurled.

Neil looked up and saw he was almost at the window. In a few more steps, he would be close enough to touch the sill. But then he found himself slipping, and slowly falling backwards. He could not regain his handhold and soon he was back on the ground. Undaunted, Neil climbed up again, but he was so eager that he missed a branch, and once more he wound up sitting on the grass.

The third time he climbed the tree, he got high enough to discover that the branches became too thin near the window to bear his weight. He tried stepping on the sturdiest-looking of the branches, but even that one was too weak to hold him, and down he went one more time, once again without even having seen Meg's shadow.

It was during his fourth climb that he thought to look down at himself. He

was so surprised that he lost his footing and fell to the bottom before even getting halfway up. From the grass, he looked up at the tree and smiled.

Neil must have spent hours that night climbing the tree and falling down it, but the time passed like a dream. The sun greeted him from behind the Chandrashekars' roof each time he reached the treetop, and then seemed to set again as he let himself fall down. And then rise again as he started another climb, not even caring if Meg had gotten dressed and left the house without him, and then set as he fell, naked and indestructibly aroused, onto the soft, dewy grass.

GREAT WITH CHILD

DAY ONE

It is March, 1927. Raymond Paget arrives at Studio Eight to begin work on his new film, Astray. He has been a popular performer for a few years now, despite having an unusual secret. There is a long, large bluish seam bulging out from Raymond's side. He is carrying within him his unborn twin brother. Directors have come up with ingenious ways to conceal the deformity--artful shadows, strategically-placed supporting actors, body doubles, expensive, complicated makeup techniques for the rare times when his being shirtless is absolutely necessary. Most often,

though, he is simply given a lot of close-ups. Ironically, his fans think this is done so as to highlight his dashing good looks.

Usually, Raymond spends his time dreading the day when his secret will be revealed. Today, however, a more immediate problem occupies his thinking. Raymond is convinced that this new movie of his will be a very bad one. For one thing, he is much too old for the part, that of a naive farm boy who comes to the city and falls under the seductive spell of a glamorous nightclub singer. Also, Raymond has heard that the director, Hermann von Blut (a German imported from UFA), is a temperamental perfectionist who has already cost the studio a small fortune in delays. The sets have been rebuilt to his specifications twice, and the script has been rewritten more than a dozen times by half the writers on the lot. Originally, the singer was supposed to control the farm boy by getting him addicted to drugs, but von Blut found that plotline distasteful. So then the farm boy became the singer's kept man, enslaved by sex. During the next few revisions, some idiot in the writers' building got hold of the script and made the farm boy into the singer's manager. It took four more drafts to fix the damage. The writers wound up keeping the farm boy's girlfriend, who had first appeared in the idiot's draft, turning the farm boy back into the singer's kept man, inventing a dark lovers' triangle for the three of them, and making the girlfriend pregnant.

Raymond has received a new draft of the scenario every other day in the mail during pre-production, and now as he walks onto the set all the different versions of the script flit through his memory so that he cannot be sure just who his character

is anymore. His side begins hurting again, and he absently massages the sore spots, moving his hand up and down his rib cage. "What do you think, huh?" he murmurs. "What do you think about it all?" He watches the crew prepare the set, which has been changed nearly as often as the script. Five electricians seem to do nothing but zigzag around the cameras with coils of heavy cable over their arms, leaping instinctively over the web of wires on the floor. They nod respectfully at Raymond as they zip by. Someone turns on a pair of overhead lights, which spark and smoke and make sounds like heavy doors closing.

There is a bed at the centre of the room. It's the singer's bedroom, Raymond realizes. We must be doing the seduction scene today. Von Blut stomps about the set in riding boots, shouting orders to the crew. His interpreter, an earnest young Jewish-looking man with curly hair and glasses, translates for him. Von Blut seems obsessed with getting the lights in one corner of the room to fall just right across a full-length mirror. Nothing the stagehands do pleases him, and as Von Blut's voice gets angrier and angrier the interpreter's gets more and more apologetic. He keeps saying "Please..." and "If you could just..."

An unfamiliar stagehand walks onto the set and without saying a word to anyone begins pulling the sheets and pillows off the bed. Von Blut is so intent on the mirror that it takes a nudge from his interpreter for him to notice what is going on. Von Blut raises his hand over his head, as if his first instinct is to go for a whip. He screams in German at the young stagehand while the interpreter tries to make himself heard.

The stagehand explains. "We need these for the movie next door, the Arabian Nights. Ain't you done with them yet?"

No, you imbecile, goes the translation. Put them back! Put them all back!

The crew members give each other weary looks. It was an hour before Von Blut was satisfied with the way the pillows and the bedsheets looked, and now here we go again. Von Blut snaps his fingers and asks for some of the idle makeup girls to come and help make the bed over. They hurry onto the set, high heels clacking. An electrician comes running the other way and collides into one of them with such force that she flies through the air and smashes into the bedroom mirror. Raymond watches it all, and knows there will be no filming today. His side hurts.

DAY TWO

Eli Siegel, head of Pinnacle Studios, beckons to Raymond from across the set. "Raymond!" Siegel wears the kind of crisp, white suit that Raymond associates with fat, untrustworthy businessmen in movies set in the Far East, the kind with toothy grins and fezzes. As well, Siegel is riding a kind of rickshaw being pulled by a dutiful attendant in a crisp, white uniform like that of a street sanitation man. A canopy hangs over Siegel's head. The rickshaw's wooden wheels are painted black and gold. The seat is velvet and looks luxuriously overstuffed. There is a board that goes across his lap, so Siegel can do his paperwork; the board has a specially cut hole in one corner, in which rests a frosted glass of iced tea. "Raymond!" Siegel bellows. Raymond heads over. A woman is standing rather unsteadily beside the rickshaw,

leaning against it for support. As Raymond comes closer, he sees that the little fingernail of her left hand has been pierced with a diamond stud. Raymond thinks it makes her look like the member of some secret underground society.

"Raymond," Siegel announces once he arrives, "I wanted you to meet your co-star for this picture. She's the one who'll be playing the singer. This is Madeleine Farrell. Madeleine, this is Raymond Paget."

"How do you do?" says Raymond.

"How do you do, Mr. Paget?" says Madeleine with the uncertain politeness of a drunk. Her voice is reedy and distant, as if she were speaking from another room. The make-up people have put rings of kohl around her eyes and applied a bluish powder to her cheeks to hollow them out, but her skin is so pale and her eyes so muzzed and unfocused that she looks like a demon from a Japanese play.

"Now, Madeleine," Siegel says, "I don't know if you're familiar with our Mr. Paget here. He frightens some of the ladies, you know. Seems...well, how should I put it, Raymond? You've got kind of a bun in the oven, haven't you?"

Raymond tries to be good-natured and laugh along. He looks uneasily at Madeleine. Her fingernail diamond winks at him. "I don't know what Mr. Siegel has told you, Miss Farrell, but it's a diagnosed medical condition," he explains. "I have a twin inside me, an unborn twin. They say they can't operate--it's too dangerous. It's really nothing to comment on..."

"Makes you wonder whether I'm running a movie studio or a sideshow, doesn't it?" says Siegel. "Goddamn circus. As long as he makes money for me, I'll

keep him on, though." He leans down from his seat in the rickshaw and gives Raymond a significant look.

"Am I in the next scene?" asks Madeleine, breaking the awkward silence. She looks about the studio.

"Why, yes, sweetie," replies Siegel, straightening up. "That's why you're in costume." She looks down at herself and lets out a weird yip of surprise.

Von Blut's interpreter intrudes on the conversation. "Sorry to interrupt you, Mr. Siegel, Mr. Paget, Miss Farrell," he says, "but we're ready to begin the scene." aymond nods at him. The interpreter backs away and repeats himself: "Sorry to interrupt you."

Siegel makes a gesture to the rickshaw driver, who picks up the cart's handles. "All right. Well, I'm sure you two will enjoy working with each other, and I certainly hope you'll both work hard to make this picture a success." Siegel makes a clucking noise, the kind jockeys make to their horses, and the rickshaw is pulled briskly out of the studio. Madeleine makes an uncertain motion with her hand as Siegel is driven away, and looks about in confusion for something else she can lean on.

Raymond clears his throat. "Well, we'd better take our places."

"Yes..." She squints into the lights hanging above the set and then bats her eyes at Raymond. "Could you tell me...where exactly is it I should go?"

Raymond extends his arm, and she takes it. They are both in costume. She wears a short black satin dress with enormous, billowy sleeves. Around her neck is a long string of beads which rattle with each movement of her head. Raymond has

on a cheap cap, a fraying, slightly old-fashioned suit, and a small, blue tie. Their faces are powdered white, and Raymond walks very slowly so Madeleine can keep up with him. They look like a pair of ghosts with an interesting story behind their death.

"What's the name of this movie?" Madeleine asks Raymond as they reach the set. He tells her and she lets out a deep, gratified sound of recognition. "Oh yes...you abandon your child to be with me in this one, isn't that right?"

The scene takes place backstage at the singer's nightclub. Fancy costumes hang from lines stretching wall to wall. A cigarette smolders in an ashtray. It is the scene where Madeleine coolly demands that Raymond spend the night with her instead of returning home to his wife. He resists at first, he even makes it as far as the corridor, but the singer's spell is too powerful, and he eventually collapses into her arms as the scene fades to black.

Raymond and Madeleine run through the scene informally a couple of times, and although Raymond tries his hardest to follow Von Blut's instructions, Madeleine acts as if she is quite unaware of the bald, ferocious German screaming orders just over her shoulder. "Where are we on the page?" she keeps asking, picking up her copy of the script from the floor and dropping it down again.

Von Blut screams, snatches the pages from Madeleine's hands and tosses the script across the room. He stands in front of Madeleine and points to his chest. "You listen only to me!" explains the interpreter. Madeleine's looks at the floor, trying to spot where her script has landed, but Von Blut grabs her chin in his hand

and points her head towards him. "I am the only script, yes? Yes? Do you understand?" The interpreter's tone of voice is comically sedate compared to Von Blut's maniacal shouting. "Now we shall try again. I give the only directions you need." But his instructions are maddeningly abstract: "Now...Madeleine...I want to see the clouds rolling in...clouds, then the rain begins...and now--LIGHTNING!!!"

Madeleine considers for a couple of seconds how best to convey this idea. She widens her eyes and lifts her hand to her mouth in a pathetic display of shock, and then drops even the pretense of acting. She looks from the interpreter to Von Blut and cries, "I've never worked this way before! What page are we on?"

Von Blut ignores her. Instead, he turns the cameras on, apparently hoping she will flower under pressure. But she does not. He shouts furious words at his interpreter, who, so angry himself that he replies in English, screams back, "I <u>am</u> translating you properly! She just won't act!" Von Blut yells at him again. Spit flies. "She just won't!" the interpreter cries. "No one could follow you!"

Nevertheless, Von Blut shouts for another take and tries guiding Madeleine through her performance one more time. "Die Wolken!...Der Regen!...DER BLITZ!!!" It is no good. Von Blut waves his fists. Forgetting everything he ever said about raindrops and lightning, he now forces the interpreter to shout at Madeleine, threaten her with violence, call her a whore, anything for a reaction. But Madeleine ignores everything and retreats into an almost trancelike state of indifference. Between takes, she takes long drinks from a dainty silver flask decorated with rosebushes and tucks it away again in her garter. Her only show of

emotion occurs when she asks a lighting technician why he constantly has to aim that thing at her. A large sweat stain, like a bib, has formed on the front of Von Blut's shirt. He yells at the interpreter again, who says, "I am saying what you say. It's not working! You are doing this all wrong!"

At that, Von Blut is silent. His entire head turns red. He barks four syllables in the most guttural German Raymond has ever heard and with one imperious sweep of his arm, gestures towards the exit. The interpreter intuits that arguing is useless. He sighs and walks out of the studio, shaking his head. Neither Raymond nor anyone else in the vicinity needs a translation to understand that the interpreter has just been fired. Von Blut claps his hands and holds up ten fingers six times. They will break off filming for one hour.

Raymond eats at the studio commissary, but he has very little appetite.

On his way back, he passes by the makeup room. The door is ajar and although he cannot see her, he hears Madeleine calling him. "Raymond? Raymond, can you come in here for a minute?"

Raymond walks in. Madeleine is on a low table, lying on her stomach, naked, a white towel across her rump. A bored-looking brunette is massaging her, working some kind of cosmetic gelatin into her skin. Madeleine is so pale that the shiny jelly makes her look almost transparent. She tells the attendant to leave. Raymond can't take his eyes off her as she gets up off the table and, holding the towel in front of her, walks in a circle around him.

"Listen," he says to her. "I don't want this. Listen to me."

"You know, my name used to be Farrell Madeleine, but they changed the order around on me. I'm not from France like they say, either."

Raymond feels a kind of panic rising in him, but he tries to put his feelings into words. "Listen," he tells her. Her arm is wrapped around him, her hand on the small of his back. He notices a couple of needle marks on the inside of her elbow. "I think this movie will be a very bad one. Nothing at all is going right. Von Blut...Von Blut hasn't filmed a single scene yet, and now he won't be able to talk to us. I don't even know how he wants me to play this guy. I don't even know which script they're using. They still haven't cast my wife. And you're certainly being no help. Listen...I think we're going to be stuck in a very bad movie, trapped in it, and there's not going to be any way out of it." As soon as he has finished his speech, Raymond experiences a pain in his side so intense that it feels like someone is trying to pry his ribs apart and squeeze through. Raymond doubles over and goes down on one knee.

Madeleine bends forward, a little curious. "What is it, Raymond?" Raymond is in too much pain to speak. "Is it your side?" Suddenly, she can't stop asking questions. "Is it true what Mr. Siegel said about you, then? Is it something to do with your twin? Is it bad?" Raymond senses her hovering over him. He feels a line of sweat run behind his ear and down his neck. "Can I take a look? Here, why don't you let me take a look at it?" Raymond feels her hands under his shoulders guiding him to the table. He lies back, and sees that she has dropped the towel.

Her nipples are deep brown, and against the pure whiteness of her breasts they look like bruises on a peeled apple.

She takes his shirt off and lifts the undershirt over his head, smearing his makeup. Madeleine emits a tiny gasp of interest. "Oh my...what have we here?" She gingerly touches the long, long, knotted seam running down his entire left side. Once she realizes it doesn't hurt Raymond to be touched there, she runs her palm all along its length. She starts stroking it.

"Listen," Raymond is still trying to say something. "This movie is very bad. I don't want to be here, anywhere near here. Please. This movie is going to be so terrible."

Madeleine continues to explore Raymond's side. "It's okay. It's all right. It doesn't seem that bad to me." Madeleine's hand rests on a spot just underneath Raymond's armpit and her mouth forms itself into a little O of wonder. "Raymond," she says softly. "Raymond, I can feel a foot."

DAY THREE

Raymond spends the day in the desert. They are on location, filming the scene where the singer and her cronies rob the farm boy of all his possessions and leave him for dead in the middle of Death Valley. It is one hundred and thirty degrees. A cameraman sitting on a crane faints from heat prostration and falls twenty feet to the ground, breaking his neck. Shooting continues without him. The sand is one hundred and fifty degrees. A nurse is present for the first two hours of

shooting, but then she too faints and has to be wrapped in damp towels and driven back to town. Von Blut is impervious to the sun and orders take after take of Raymond weeping at his own foolishness. Soon, Raymond has no water left in his body to make tears, but Von Blut keeps filming. Makeup people swarm over him with eyedroppers and put tears made out of clear oil onto his face. Raymond thinks his side is expanding with the heat, as if it were about to burst. On they film. Raymond feels as if he has been filled with sand. The grit has infiltrated his mouth, his joints, his ears. It is torture. He wants to die.

That night, after Raymond, Von Blut, and the crew arrive back in town, they learn that because of a clerical mixup they have been shooting scenes from a version of the script the studio discarded three weeks ago.

DAY FOUR

Before shooting begins, Eli Siegel visits the set. With him in the rickshaw are two passengers: Von Blut and a young, wide-eyed woman who avoids everyone's glances and is sucking so avidly on a piece of candy that her cheeks have hollows. She holds her hands timidly in front of her mouth and wears a hat, it seems, less for style than as a way of hiding her eyes. Raymond thinks he has seen her before at studio parties--he vaguely remembers her being introduced as somebody important's niece.

Siegel dismounts from the rickshaw to deliver his speech. Von Blut stands behind him. Siegel speaks through a megaphone: "May I have your attention,

please," his voice booms. "Miss Madeleine Farrell has been removed from the cast of this picture." Raymond remembers being in Madeleine's dressing room and how ghostly she looked, and he feels an unexpected sense of loss. The rest of the people in the studio are murmuring excitedly at the news of the dismissal, but Siegel raises his hand and it stops. "Appearing in Madeleine's place in the picture will be a new...uh, discovery of mine, Miss Janet Browning."

On cue, the girl tries to climb down from the rickshaw, but the hem of her dress becomes caught on one of the decorative knobs protruding from the cab's edge. She still has both feet on the rickshaw's stair as she pulls her dress free. She has pulled too hard, and is thrown off-balance. The heel of one of her shoes breaks, and she falls with a thud to the ground.

Instantly, a crowd gathers around the fallen girl. Raymond rushes forward and tries to help her up, but Janet yanks her arm away from him. "You're that Raymond Paget, aren't you?" she asks. "I've heard about you." There is a look of naked revulsion on her face. She is actually baring her teeth at him, and Raymond notices her candy has stained them orange.

In the end, Siegel helps Janet up himself. "Somebody get her to Makeup," he says over his shoulder. Four stagehands each grab a limb and carry her off the set. Raymond rubs his side as he watches her go. "It's all right," he says. "Don't listen to her."

When she is brought out an hour later, she is dressed completely in black.

Her eyes have deep black smudgy pools drawn around them and her dress is a cylindrical satin sheath. She wears a tall headdress with a long black peacock feather and a white jewel dangling in front of her forehead. Raymond notices that one of her ankles is in a splint.

She holds onto a makeup girl's arm as she is led back onto the set. After that morning's encounter with her, Raymond has not been wishing her well, but he takes one look at this spectacle, at the poor girl's frightened eyes on either side of that enormous swinging jewel, and he cannot help but feel a small tinge of pity for her. He knows disaster is imminent and wonders what executive is so hell-bent on turning his little girl into a Hollywood star. The makeup girl guides Janet to a chair and is about to leave when Janet seizes her by the wrist.

"Thank you for all your help," she whispers in the breathy voice of an invalid.

The makeup girl looks at her wrist. "It's all right, Miss Browning," the girl says, a little impatiently.

Janet licks her lips. "May I ask you...Do you--do you think you could stay here with me for a little while longer?"

"Why? Is there something else you need done?"

"No, it's just that you all have been so kind to me..."

An assistant director, Jensen, strides past them, primly clapping his hands. "Okay, everyone! Places! Places!"

"You'd better get moving," the makeup girl says, but Janet does not budge. "Oh, for--Look, this is an easy scene."

"Yeah," Jensen says. "Why, even somebody with no talent at all could handle this one." A crew member behind him snickers quietly.

The scene takes place in the nightclub where the farm boy first lays eyes on the singer who will destroy his life. She is performing in a decadent jazz boite into which he has wandered simply to get out of the rain, but her song is so seductive that not only does he stay but after her act is over he goes backstage to meet her.

A technician pulls a lever on a large, box-shaped machine and floods the set with simulated cigarette smoke. The actors playing the musicians have taken their places on the cramped stage and are miming the act of tuning up. Extras, outfitted in evening clothes, fill every table--except the one right in front of the stage where Raymond will sit. Von Blut looks at Janet in her costume, and seems to sense immediately that she is beyond hope. Instead, he focuses on the extras, miming for them the expressions he wants them to have, not leaving them until they can imitate him exactly.

Raymond takes his position at the perimeter of the set. The crew members stop talking as they concentrate on their tasks. Von Blut shouts a phlegmy syllable which can only be the German word for "Action!" The scene begins.

Raymond's character, drawn by the musicians' melody, wanders through the tables, aware of the stares his simple clothes are getting from the sophisticated audience members. But he doesn't care, something compels him forward. He takes his seat, alone at the table, and gazes up at the stage. Then out comes "Uschi," the singer. Raymond watches her from his seat. He tries to act, to make himself fall in

love with her, but he cannot. She opens her mouth to sing and even the pity he felt for her just minutes ago vanishes. All he can think of are her stained orange teeth.

Her mouth is open, but no sound comes out of it. She tries again, and again has no success. She looks towards the camera, to Von Blut, almost begging for guidance. Raymond turns in his seat and sees the director frowning, eyes blazing, motioning for her to go on with the scene. Janet looks towards the wings and Raymond senses that she wants to run. Instead, she opens her mouth one last time, and vomits.

The only sound on the set is Von Blut screaming his first English word: "Cut! Cut! Cut!"

DAY FIVE

A new version of the script, commissioned by Eli Siegel himself, arrives in Raymond's dressing room. This one tries to compensate for Janet by making the singer into an ex-farm girl herself, lured into the world of sex and jazz singing by an unscrupulous promoter. Her lure for the farm boy now is apparently a shared knowledge of rural life. The sexual encounters between the singer and the farm boy in her dressing room are turned into a trip they take together to a fair where the farm boy wins a pie-eating contest.

DAY SIX

Filming begins on the pie-eating scene. Von Blut has ceased to care about

any aspect of the film's plot and now devotes all his attention to details of lighting, camera placement, and direction and choreography of extras. Having given up all hope of turning out even a half-decent film seems to have freed him somehow. He appears happier now than at any other time during the shoot. Raymond sometimes overhears him whistling popular American songs he couldn't possibly understand the words to.

Raymond is intensely unhappy about today's scene, however, and tries to convey this to Von Blut without using English. He points to the script and shakes his head no. He holds his nose and scowls. He tries a few words of pidgin German: "Nein! Nein! Verboten! Dumpkopf!" Von Blut nods impatiently--"Ja, ja"--and motions for him to take his place on the set. Von Blut is ready to start filming the scene.

Raymond and five other farm boys sit behind a long picnic table on a raised platform under a red-and-white checkered canopy. In front of each is a blueberry pie. Stacks of pies line the back of the platform, each in a shining metal tin. An attendant stands behind each contestant ready to shove a new pie in front of him as soon as he is finished with the old one.

In the audience is Uschi the singer, still dressed in black, wearing a long, smothering boa, thick, heavy bracelets hanging from her tiny white arms. Each time she inhales, one of the feathers on her boa gets sucked into her mouth, in and out, in and out. Farther back in the crowd is the farm boy's wife, who will confront him about his infidelity just after his moment of triumph, when he is declared the

contest's winner. How she has followed him to the fairground is anyone's guess, but nonetheless there she lurks.

Von Blut cries out for the actors to begin the scene. Raymond plunges his face through the lardy crust of the pie into the filling, blueberries. The stew of berries fills his nose and even gets into the corners of his eyes. He can feel the skin of each little berry sticking to his teeth, refusing to be swallowed. The pie isn't warm and it isn't cold, it's neutral and has barely any taste at all. He finishes the first pie. As he straightens he sees Janet jumping up and down, emotional for the first time, urging him on to victory. He gasps for breath and feels a blueberry shoot up his nose.

He begins the second pie. Strange how easy it is to be up here, he says to himself as he works his way to the bottom. These pies seem almost soundproof; the noise of the crowd is like a barely discernible background hum.

Third pie. This is going to be a very bad movie, he thinks to himself. He has known it from the start, but this is the first time he can feel himself actually participating in the film's badness. He's caught in the net now. He has shut out the noise of the crowd, but he thinks he can actually hear the whir of the camera. He's being photographed. The camera is aimed right at him, but he doesn't feel so much pinned as he does wrapped. He is part of the scene, it has no edge and he is at its centre, and no triumph of acting, no swell of audience goodwill can rescue him.

Fourth pie. Why doesn't he stop? Why doesn't he run off the set and leap onto a train that will take him into another state? Raymond thinks that maybe it is

because it is something he is taking part in creating. It is partially his. He doesn't think he could leave it if he tried.

Fifth pie. Almost without Raymond's knowing it, his side has begun hurting. It hurts very much now. He thinks that maybe having eaten so many pies has done something to worsen his condition. The pain is much worse than anything he has ever felt before. Yet he goes on with the scene. He sits up, a look of agony on his face. The crowd cheers. Raymond wonders fleetingly if somehow he appeared to be grimacing in triumph. Someone places a sixth pie in front of him. He eats it. He dives into the seventh just as the pain causes him to pass out.

Raymond drifts in and out of consciousness for the next few days. Everything seems to be in black and white. He remembers most clearly riding a gurney into an operating room, surrounded by excited doctors. He remembers snatches of conversation, visualizing them as if they are printed on title cards:

"...extremely rare..."

"...bruise all along his side..."

"Well, we're going to have a hell of a time removing it..."

"My God, it's hideous!" That last from a nurse. She puts her hand over her mouth, and recoils.

DAY SEVEN

Raymond receives a visit in the hospital from Madeleine Farrell. She is

delighted at having located him, as if she never expected to see him again. She accidentally smacks her arm against the door frame as she enters the room. "Raymond!" she cries. "I didn't know where to find you! I've been wandering through this hospital forever!"

Raymond is still woozy from the operation and it is an effort to speak. "Madeleine?" he says, trying to sit up straighter.

Madeleine rushes to his side. Raymond notices through his haziness that she is wearing mismatched stockings, one black and one brown. "It is you!" she exclaims. "Don't try to speak! I brought you flowers!" From behind her back, she produces an enormous bundle of daisies. "Do you have a vase?"

Raymond shakes his head vaguely.

"Well, we shall have to ask the nurse for one!" She pulls up a chair beside Raymond's bed and sits. "You look well," she notes. "Are they treating you well here?"

"Well enough, I guess..." His head clears a little and his vision focuses. Madeleine seems much more animated today than she ever did at the studio, he thinks. She's glowing, in fact. He tries to sit up, but Madeleine won't let him.

"No, no, no! You take it easy, someone in your condition. After what you've been through! Now, you let me take care of you..." Against Raymond's protests, she begins fluffing his pillows and straightening his covers, talking nonstop. "Was it painful? I hope it wasn't painful, because sometimes...And how big was it?"

Madeleine falls suddenly quiet as she pulls Raymond's sheets away from him.

Her hand goes to her mouth. Raymond's torso is wrapped in bandages and gauze. A brown stain, the result of a weeping wound, runs down his side. "Oh, Raymond!" Madeleine gasps. "What happened to you? What have they done?" She reaches under his armpit again, where she once felt the tiny foot. There's nothing there and she cannot bear to hold her hand there for very long. "Oh, Raymond!" she says with a stricken expression on her face. "Lost...! How awful for you!"

Involuntarily, Raymond begins to cry. Madeleine sits next to him on the bed and cradles him in her arms. Her clothes smell of stale cigarettes. She wraps her arms tightly around him and kisses him on the top of his head, on his neck, on his lips. Raymond holds onto her tight.

THE OPERAGOER

Joel had finished his lunch early and decided to take a stroll downtown before returning to work. He rounded a corner and, about half a block ahead of him, he saw Miriam coming the other way. Instantly, he ducked into a cigar store, out of her line of sight, and he stayed hidden, thumbing through magazines, until he was sure she was gone. He and Miriam had been living together for close to a year now and Joel knew there were problems, but he hadn't realized how many until that moment when he instinctively avoided meeting her on the street. He trudged back to the office but couldn't work.

He remembered how one morning, a week after he had moved in with Miriam, they were both running late for work and so took their showers together. Miriam finished first and stepped out of the stall. When Joel was done, he pushed the curtain aside and saw Miriam standing in front of him, naked, in the middle of the bathroom. Without missing a beat, she covered herself with her towel and screamed like a woman caught in the shower by a stranger. She'd found such a brilliant, instinctive joke in the situation, and she'd had such a wonderful, comical look on her face that Joel thought it was the funniest thing he had ever seen in his life. He talked about it later that day with friends at work, but it was such a hard joke to describe that nobody really got it. To his surprise, Joel didn't mind that at all. The ineffability of the incident only seemed to increase its purity and preciousness.

On moments like that, Joel could coast for weeks. At night, when he told Miriam, "I adore you," he knew he meant it. "I worship you. I lay sacrifices at your feet." He sometimes got ridiculous, he knew, but his sentiments were, at the core, absolutely sincere.

And nowadays his compliments had to be so artful where once they had come so naturally, Joel thought as he looked at the photograph of Miriam on his desk. She was smiling, and she looked pretty, but you could tell she didn't brush her teeth very carefully. Her front and back teeth were usually white, but the ones on the curve were always a dull yellow and made Joel think of corn Niblets. He sometimes watched her brush in the mornings (she never flossed) and he saw that, sure enough,

she never did pay attention to the side teeth, the incisors. Joel knew she probably didn't even realize she was doing anything wrong, she was always in such a rush after she got up, but he never bothered to point out her sloppiness to her. There seems to be a line, Joel thought, beyond which faults become too personal for even a loved one to point out. For instance, Joel felt he could nudge her in the middle of the night to tell her she was snoring or mumbling, but not to say she was drooling on the pillow.

Joel also felt reluctant to criticize Miriam because it was her apartment he was living in. She had painted it herself and bought almost all the furniture. She was richer than Joel, and it was her domain. Joel had liked that fact at first; in fact, he got a kind of erotic thrill simply out of the idea of moving into it. The main room was especially large and airy, with windows lining the western side of it and plants the eastern. Joel basked in every new, unaccustomed detail: the rooms seemed warmer during the winter months than his apartment had been, her oven was more efficient, and even her water--her very water--seemed to taste cleaner and purer.

Joel had read about ancient religions where they had constructed temples to the gods which only men could enter. If a woman somehow got inside, the temple was considered defiled and had to be destroyed. Joel wondered if Miriam's apartment operated in reverse, if maybe he'd gone someplace he shouldn't have. For now that he was living with her, he knew all Miriam's particulars. He knew exactly how she spent her day. He watched her dress and struggle into her clothes. He saw

the hairs in the sink and the mascara on the pillows and the blood in the toilet. Last night, during a conversation with her, he realized that Miriam didn't even know the name of the Vice President of the United States, and he wondered just what kind of a dunce he'd been in love with for the last year and a half.

Joel got up from his desk. He had to break it off with Miriam. He would leave work early and all the way home he would work on a speech he could deliver to her. Joel wondered how painful it would be, how civil they would be to each other. He wondered where he would spend the evening. He suddenly had an image of himself standing at a bus stop with a small, thin, blue suitcase in one hand. A waif.

Joel felt a tinge of envy for the seemingly effortless way his parents got along. His mother's interests and his father's interests had always been perfectly meshed. They used to finish each other's sentences. "You know, that principal of Joel's reminds me of..." "Leonard Bernstein!"

Once, when Joel was eleven, his parents got it into their heads that he would enjoy going to the opera, and so they took him to, of all things, a performance of Wagner's Die Walküre at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City. Driving home, all Joel could remember of the evening was what happened when he went to the washroom. In fact, he didn't have to go that badly, but he was so bored that any excuse to leave his seat seemed appealing.

Once he reached the lobby, Joel pushed open the first likely door he saw and marched inside. Everything was suddenly very quiet. He was the only person there.

It took a little while before Joel realized he was inside the ladies' room. Joel stared in wonder at the room's sheer opulence: it was like the fanciest hall in an exotic mansion. The floor was covered in a red carpet so deep that Joel could barely feel the ground beneath him. One wall was mirrored and made the room look twice as large as it actually was, and the mirrors had been polished until they shone. The chairs were made of wood and wrought iron and looked to Joel like informal thrones. In the centre of everything was a circular sort of bench, covered in velvet the same shade of red as the carpet. Farther back, behind a marble outcropping, were all the sinks and the toilet stalls. Joel saw glass jars full of colognes and colourful perfumed soaps lined up on the marble counter of the vanity. Every available porcelain surface gleamed with the deepest white.

Joel spent some fifteen minutes inside the ladies' room. He wanted to sit everywhere and touch everything and run all the taps. It was only the insistent fear that an angry usher might discover him prowling about in the incorrect room that brought Joel out again. As he stepped outside, he let his fingers linger on the cool wood of the door.

Joel found the men's room soon after. He spent no extra time inside it. It was quite a contrast. The floor was covered with hard white tile, the stall he used had a swearword carved into the wall with a knife, and an old, sad-eyed black man sat on a broken chair by the sinks, silently handing out dingy towels.

It was the kind of experience that makes an impression on a young mind, Joel said to himself as he rode the elevator up to his and Miriam's apartment, the kind

of thing that can make a boy look at women in a different way. When he had returned to his parents' box, he asked his father who those women were, the ones on the stage.

Joel's father leaned over and whispered the answer into his ear as if he were imparting an essential secret of the universe. "They're the goddesses."

Goddesses! thought Joel derisively as he rode the elevator up to Miriam's floor. My Aphrodite! Soon, the door opened and Joel took a deep breath before stepping outside. This was it, the last time this would feel like coming home. As he walked down the corridor, though, he thought he could hear someone, a woman, singing. He listened a bit more closely and realized that the voice was coming from his apartment. For a moment, he couldn't think who it was and then it occurred to him that it must be Miriam.

He unlocked the door and now he could hear the sound of the shower running. It was Miriam. She was humming an old song that the two of them always liked: "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum." What an unlikely song, and yet how beautifully she was singing it. Joel's mind filled in the lyrics: "The weather's getting fine...The coffee tastes like wine...It's spring, you hoboes sing, 'Hallelujah, I'm a bum again.'" She had come home early, too, Joel realized. She was in the shower, rinsing off the grime of the day; and shortly she would emerge in something new and white and clean. But he didn't want to think about that right now; he wanted to concentrate on her in the shower, singing, the water ringing off the tiles. Joel sat down quietly outside the bathroom door. What a voice! Miriam sang: "Your home is always near...the

moon's your chandelier...Your ceiling is the sky...Way up high." Joel closed his eyes. He could feel himself falling in love with her all over again.

MY FAVORITE WORD

You never hear it anymore, but I really like the word "Negress." It's how I sometimes refer to myself, because I think it sounds very imperial and majestic. When new people hear me use the word, it also sets me apart in their minds and makes me different, and that's good, too.

Some people seem to find it easy to stereotype me, so I guess I'm self-conscious about staying unusual. I'm twenty years old, I'm black, and while I'm going to school I'm working part-time as a model. Now, you would think that ought to mean I'm pretty, too, but nowadays half the women you see in the ads and the

layouts in Vogue and Elle are surprisingly ugly, which seems to be the fad the fashion world is into lately. You might not believe me, but I've actually taken a couple of women's studies courses at university, and did well in them, too, even though the instructors seemed to begrudge having a model know as much as I do about women's issues. But it quickly becomes obvious from listening to them lecture that they really don't read these magazines, because they talk about the unrealistic images of women they present. What they don't seem to realize is that you hardly ever see Christie Brinkley and all those Barbie doll women around anymore. No, right now it looks like the magazines and the agencies have been going out of their way to uncover girls with big noses and tiny, uneven breasts and truss them up underneath unattractive, clumpy hairdos and...well, their dresses are ugly, too.

I, on the other hand, am pretty. My mother, who was not, told me at a very early age not to brag about myself, so I will stop short of calling myself beautiful, but why the false modesty? I was "discovered" by a professional photographer while I was still in grade nine, and I've made money for him, too, so I must at least be pretty, right? My first shoot for him was done with a crowd of other young girls. It was a cheap operation, and we all had to share the same dressing room. We were going to be wearing bathing suits, and so for a while in the dressing room, you couldn't move for all the naked girls standing around. Now, in a girls' locker room, there isn't much of that casual nudity that men seem to think exists. They have a dream palace image that's kind of fantastical. Actually, girls hide themselves away, and hardly anyone is terribly attractive. Their bodies just hang upon them, pale and

untended and unimprovable, and the thin, dark-cracked tiles on the walls throw a greenish light on all of them.

The models' room was different, though. It had deep blue walls, for starters. The lockers weren't in rows; instead, they ran around the perimeter of the room, so we all had an unimpeded view of each other. I was thirteen and just finishing grade eight, but most of the others were fourteen or fifteen and in high school. But I was a part of their group now, and I was amazed to see that there were so many of us! So many beautiful, long-legged girls! An army! It was a large room, and still we were crowded.

Do you work at looking this way at fourteen or fifteen? No, it just happens, and before long, some young boy talks to you, a teacher treats you differently, a professional photographer notices you, and that new path has been taken, and down, down, down it you go. Or up, up, up, or whatever. I don't see this as an issue. Women are always saying how we should be respected for our intelligence instead of our beauty. And then I say, But isn't a person's intelligence basically as much a random product of their genes as their beauty is? So then, isn't judging someone's worth by her intelligence just as unfair as judging her by her beauty? And what's so wrong with beauty, which is supposedly such a nice thing in art and in nature? I was planning to use this argument in a women's studies essay I had to do last year. I was looking forward to bucking the party line, but I couldn't find any material on it. In the end I figured, screw it, maybe my thinking's too original, so instead I did something on Margaret Atwood. I knuckled under and talked about how she

exposed women's victimization by a patriarchal society, and I got a terrific mark. I wanted to tear the paper up as soon as the professor returned it.

Once I had a photograph taken of myself in silhouette, for a lingerie ad. I stood against a blue background in a bodysuit, with my chin tilted upwards toward the deep blue studio lights, which were supposed to darken the colour of my skin even further until my face was completely in shadow. I still have a lot of the shots. Most of them were never used. But every once in a while I haul out my folder and take a look at them. There's one I linger over; it's the picture of myself that's had the widest circulation of them all. People make jokes about how ironic it is that it's the one where you can't even make out my face. But I can't imagine how anyone could not know it was me. The curves of my shoulders, the inbite under my arm, the narrowing swipe my body takes towards my waist, and the odd way the line veers away again and slopes along my legs--that's me, that's unmistakably me, and the combination of the greyish-black shadow that I'm covered with and the deep blue of that background wall makes me look very lovely indeed.

People sometimes ask me if it's harder to find work being a black model. The thing of it is, you have to carve out your own niche. Most of the time, people want white models, that's just the name of the game, but they'll usually want to throw in a black girl too to balance things out, so if you've proven yourself in the past, that spot can be yours. Plus, if they want to make things symmetrical as you go down the runway, they've got to put the black model in the centre, so it's an attention-getter, as well. And there's always those all-black fashion shows, and if you don't mind

wearing a few "outrageous" tigerskin outfits and those African hats they sell in the bazaars downtown, there'll always be a place for you there.

I made fifteen thousand dollars last year while I was going to university, which is a lot more than I made the summer I got into an argument with my photographer, who was always after me to show a little bit more and a little bit more, and so I decided to get out of the business for a while and get a job waiting tables. And people insist that I was exploited when I was with him, and all of the money I made was some kind of blood money. But none of those pictures was anything I didn't want to do, and it was a beautiful, high-reward, low-effort kind of situation I had going. Waitressing was when I was exploited. My feet were covered with purple sores at the end of the day, my hair smelled of grease, I had to rely on the whims of obnoxious strangers for my daily wages, and people were rude to me for the first time in my life.

Still, rude as they were, my race never came up. It hardly ever has. I don't know from discrimination; some of my white friends envy me for my heritage. So I don't think I have much understanding of what writers are always calling the "black experience". I took a Black Studies program once at university, which was pretty unpleasant for a number of reasons, chief among which was the fact that, as the prettiest black girl in the class, I immediately became some kind of Kenyan love object to all these Negrophile young men sitting around me. But even more deeply, I was nothing except bored by all the material we had to study. The instructor, who looked like a dwarf-sized version of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, had us read a pile of

books by the great black authors: Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Maya Angelou. I knew the names, but I felt almost no connection to these dark, earnest men and women posed so nobly in the portraits printed on the flyleaves. I lived in the suburbs! Who were these characters, these spiritual, cleanly lesbian black women, and these poetically angry young black men walking through the ghettoes? I seemed to be the only one in the class who actually enjoyed Uncle Tom's Cabin, because it was so trashy and artificial and full of good, lurid fun that the fact we were studying it in university seemed almost subversive.

I used to like Irish music and Irish songs and ballads. I still do. They're so passionate, and they're always affirming how women tend to get the better of men. In fact, I used to be in a step-dancing group. If you haven't seen it, step-dancing is an Irish form of dancing that for one thing has the allure of being a dance that only girls have ever been allowed to perform. There are countless step routines, all of them quite ritualized, but the basic idea is that you only move from the waist downward while your spine stays rigid and your arms hang by your sides. The limits it puts on you are even worse than soccer! And yet, the girls who have gotten good at it go stamping unstoppably through the room and leaping unexpectedly forward across the floor. They wear special skirts that have long panels that flap about them like stiff green petals, exposing the thick, cable-like muscles that have developed in their legs.

Eight of us would gather for our weekly practices. We knew a fiddler who was more than happy to play for us--he couldn't take his eyes off us, but he was

harmless, and we hardly minded. First, we would form a line, and as the music began, we'd execute a complicated series of steps, which involved a kind of stationary tap dancing; we crossed our feet into something that would be a ballet pose if we held it, but we stayed motionless for only a second. In this step, the head has to look forward, and then to the sides, and forward again, all in time with the others. And then the line would split up, and we'd be in circular groups of four, each holding on to an imaginary pole in the centre with one hand, and dancing around the room. Then we had our solos. I remember: our shoes were so soft and the music seemed to fill up so much of the room that when each of us took the floor in turn, we seemed almost silent. I remember how I would reach a certain point where I wouldn't have to concentrate on the next step anymore. The Irish music, music from across the ocean, would play. My legs would just take on a life of their own and dance me with a steady, complex rhythm across the floor while my head remained perfectly still.

I'd practice a couple of times a week, and eventually I got good enough so that the "Black Irish" jokes wore off and I was accepted among the girls. There were seven others in the core of the group, all of them second- or third-generation Irish. Most of them had been forced into taking the lessons by adamant grandparents who would turn up at our recitals and clap enthusiastically along with the music and let out whoops of approval. (My parents would sit quietly in one of the back rows, too amazed to speak.)

One of the girls was named Melissa, an average dancer, with red hair and a

muddy spray of freckles across her face and arms. I surreptitiously watched her as we changed, and saw that the freckles were across her breasts and thighs as well. She had a round body and a thick pair of legs. She struck me as the kind of shy girl who cries and studies hard, but never does well in school, and who keeps taking figure-skating lessons without ever getting better. She was eighteen; I guess I would have been around fourteen, and just starting to model.

I never really gave Melissa a second thought. She was much older than me, but I sure didn't have much respect for her. I never talked to her, and I think my being black kind of unnerved her, so that she never approached me, either. But her boyfriend, who was also Irish, at least in heritage, and was named Brian, started coming by every once in a while to our practice hall to walk Melissa home. He was a pretty regular visitor, and I thought he was so handsome that he could have gotten a job acting on TV. He was nineteen, even older than Melissa.

What happened next might sound like a scheme, but I guarantee you that it wasn't premeditated at all. At one practice--it was a Wednesday afternoon--Melissa got a call saying that her mother had fallen down the stairs and had been taken to the hospital with a broken hip. An older woman, who had an office down the hall from where we practiced, volunteered to drive her to the hospital. The practice went on without her--we just danced around the empty space in the line--and, of course, it wasn't long before Brian showed up looking for Melissa.

I told him she had to leave early, and then...I don't remember who suggested it, but we were heading in the same direction, and we agreed to walk at least part

of the way together. I was perspiring from all the exercise, I remember, and wet strands of my hair, which was quite long and loose at the time, kept falling down in front of my face, and I would laugh and push it back. So it was, like, how fetching I must have seemed.

The day was very hot, and my house was the first stop. When we reached it, I looked up at him and asked him if he would like something cold to drink. He said sure, and it was all perfectly innocent as I held the door for him and pointed out where the kitchen was. "What would you like?" I asked him, and he asked me, "What do you have? Do you have any beer?" My parents weren't home at the time. There were a couple of rows of beer in the refrigerator, though, and so I asked him if he would like one of those. I knew my parents wouldn't be back for the rest of the afternoon, and so we brought a few with us to the sunroom at the back of the house.

I'd never been much of a drinker to begin with, and I emptied that bottle in what was record time for me. So everything sped up, and what normally would have stopped with just a little bit of kissing went on far past that point. I can still see him over me, hitting his head against the coffee table again and again, and not really seeming to care. And then he had his mouth open, and I saw a long, thin strand of drool ooze over his lip. I tried to move away from it, but he was much bigger than I was, and he had me on the bottom so that I couldn't twist very far, and the drool landed on my neck. Brian was too out of breath to say anything more than a heavy, panted, "Sorry." He looked very embarrassed, and it occurred to me suddenly that

I had some very real power. I could have stopped everything right there. I could have wrinkled up my face, sat up, and pushed him off me, asking him what he thought he was doing, didn't he realize how disgusting that was? I could have really taken control, and made him beg for the opportunity to continue. I bet he would have begged, too. Why didn't I make him? He was hardly an irresistible lover, and yet, on some level, he must have been. I had a plan all prepared for taking control, but I didn't want to use it and maybe have it backfire. I was unable to resist him.

Afterwards, we lay beside each other on the carpet, with the short, rough pile pressing painfully into my back. We looked up at the ceiling and felt the breeze blowing above us. At one point, Brian took my hand in his and looked at it over and over again. He seemed fascinated by the difference in colour between the back of it and the light-coloured palm, and the milky-brown colour of the skin underneath my fingernails. He said that the lines on my palm were so dark that they looked encrusted with dirt.

After a few minutes, without warning, Brian leapt to his feet and announced, "Well, I guess I'd better get going." He bustled around the room, picking up his discarded clothes.

"So soon?" I asked him, in what I thought was a sultry voice.

"Yeah." He tucked in his shirt. "You know, right," he said, "that this isn't a permanent thing? That this had better be just once?"

He had dressed so quickly. Already he was getting away. "Well, you can always come by whenever," I said. "I'm always with the dance group."

"Yeah," he said. "I'll probably see you there."

He stood in the middle of the room, looking around to see if he had forgotten anything. "Where you going now?" I asked.

"I've got some things to do. You know."

I couldn't believe I'd had so much power just a few minutes ago. Now I couldn't even find out what he was going to do next, one hour into the future. I sat naked on the floor and watched him pull up his socks. Then he said he had better leave by the back way, I guess meaning in case Melissa or one of her friends should happen to walk by and see him.

A few weeks later, I quit the dance group because now it seemed that people in the audience at our recitals always talked amongst themselves when I came onto the floor. I suddenly thought I looked silly. I didn't really feel as though I fit in with the rest of the girls and I did stick out in the crowd, as good a dancer as I was.

Around the same time, I was overcome with a total, paralyzing fear that I was going to have a baby. The fear wasn't completely irrational; I could very well have been pregnant. But the fear made me do irrational things. I could barely sleep for the next two weeks, and I would absently hit my stomach with my fists or press in upon it with the palm of my hand, as if to squash even the first signs of a mischance. I told this to a black activist friend of mine about a month ago, and he told me I was externalizing my subconscious guilt over having betrayed my race, which just goes to show what a lot of reading will do to you. No...what had happened was that I'd fallen into superstition. I couldn't even picture what my insides might look like, what

strange transformations they might be undergoing. I had no facts to go by, no idea how to stave off a baby. All I knew was that I was in tremendous danger. There was such a terrifying possibility that I might turn out to be that girl who was dumb enough to have gotten pregnant at age fourteen.

Not long ago, a group of people I know joined a demonstration to protest the police killing of a native who'd supposedly robbed a convenience store but who turned out later to be perfectly innocent. There was a lot of outrage, and everybody was going to meet at the university and march en masse to the city park across from the killer-cop's station house. Everyone I ran into that week asked me if I was going on the march and eventually I started saying yes, I was too.

But my heart wasn't in it. There were over two thousand of us marching downtown. Quite a few people had made signs and invented chants with catchy rhymes for the native's last name. I found it heard to join in. My voice had the kind of false enthusiasm people get while praising disappointing Christmas presents or resurrecting Tinkerbell by claiming that they do believe in fairies. I remember I had marched halfway across the bridge which connected the two halves of the city, when I realized I couldn't even think of the policeman's name, the name of the man whose actions had supposedly gotten me so angry that I just had to march against him. I looked around until I spotted a sign that mentioned the cop by name. Oh yeah...Simmons.

I decided to leave. It was easy to make the decision; my friends and I had

been separated from each other long ago in all the hubbub of the marching. What was harder was trying to walk back to where I'd come from and fight the flow of all the other marchers. It was a tight squeeze in spots, and sometimes I was knocked against the railing. But eventually I got the hang of it. I was able to dodge oncoming marchers and slip between them. A couple of times, when I slid past a man, we would touch and he would give me a smile and look down over his shoulder at my hips or my legs as I passed by. It was a hot day and I didn't have much on.

I pressed on through the endless rows of marchers. Maybe I was simply becoming more aware of it, but there definitely seemed to be more and more men noticing me and smiling and looking at me. Some said hi. I caught a whiff of my own perfume as the wind changed and I wondered if maybe any of them would follow me. I wondered how little I would have to do to get one of these marchers to abandon the demonstration and run after me instead. Once again, I pictured myself, how I must have looked. A beautiful black girl, forcing her way against the crowd, showing flashes of a dancer's grace. What would a man think? Would I look like a dream? As I passed one guy, one of the straps of my blouse slipped off, and he actually stopped in mid-chant to stare at my shoulder. Now, I had never paid attention to men on the street before. All the whistles and the half-hidden looks seemed beneath contempt and of course I ignored them. But now I paid attention to all of them. What longing there was on some of those marchers' faces! And suddenly, I was able to see each man who looked backward as part of a marvelous triumph. For that small moment at least, as they watched me disappear behind

them, they considered putting aside the march and chasing something that seemed more important and desirable, a Negress, something worth fighting their way against a crowd for.

AT DAEDALUS'

Daedalus' Greek Restaurant is an unhappy place to work. The condition is not the fault of the owner, Nick, a large, benevolent man who treats his employees with affection and respect; nor are matters of money to blame, for the business is doing well, well enough to support an all-Greek serving staff of thirteen people, not to mention the all-Greek kitchen and cleaning staff, all of whom work for good wages at least five days a week. The place is even well-lit. And yet, not one of them is happy, and not one of them can really foresee a nearby date when they will be. No shared cause lies at the root of their common sadness, other than the fact that

having to work almost daily alongside so many other people afflicted with the same dull unhappiness has only strengthened the emotion, made it appear normal, so that even had one of them wanted to break out of his sadness, he could imagine no new, alternative mood to assume instead. It is like forgetting even how to be happy. And it is doubly debilitating to suffer so while working in a Greek restaurant, where being boisterously, heel-kickingly, plate-smashingly, eager-to-kiss-you happy forms the very foundation of the job.

No one is thinking of suicide, rest assured. But look at them, half-dead anyway, as the night shift staggers in for another evening's work. The Daedalus serving staff uniform is a kind of modified, Westernized Greek ensemble: black dress pants and vest, but a loose, flowing shirt, large, black boots with the pantlegs tucked into the tops, and a colourful, fringed sash that goes around the waist. The servers are all male, and almost all of them hate the outfit and the half-hearted way it attempts to evoke an Eastern European style while using clothes from the downtown department stores. True, they are all Greek, or at least half-Greek, but none of them have seen Greece, and they have only mastered enough of the Greek language to be able to pronounce the curious fricative noise at the start of the Greek work for "swordfish".

The kitchen is vast and white. Long, low, wooden tables covered with vegetables and meat line the room. Immense pots steam on the stoves. The scent of fresh bread is in the air. The cooks seem not to notice; they bend awkwardly over the tables and slice the peppers and the carrots with nearly mechanical ease. Over

a set of oven doors, a large Greek travel poster hangs, so covered with a residue of smoke and flecks of burned fat that the image can barely be seen. There is a closet in a small room just at the rear of the kitchen. The staff congregates here, changing into their sashes, pulling on their boots, arranging their pantlegs. Jim is the staff supervisor, and he overhears a conversation.

"Can I ask you a favour, Chris?" Mike asks.

"Sure."

"Can we switch sections tonight? I'd really--"

"What do you want to switch sections for?"

"Well, I bought these new shoes the other day, and now I've got a blister on my heel, and it's really going to hurt going up and down stairs all night..."

Chris makes a noise of reluctance. "This is my best night, Mike..."

"Oh....Well, come on, Chris, I can barely walk as it is."

Jim approaches them. "There's a problem over the sections?" They explain the situation to him. "Chris," Jim says, "you take Mike's section for tonight. At the end of the night, you can exchange your tips. Okay? Now, go!"

They both nod okay, but in fact neither of them is happy. Mike has always felt he deserves to get a better section of the restaurant than the one he's always saddled with, and now he's getting robbed of his tips the first time he's been able to finagle himself something better. Chris thinks he's getting robbed, too, since Mike will never earn the tips he would, and he doesn't believe the blister is all that bad in the first place, and he hates climbing up and down stairs with platters of food in his

hands even more than Mike does. And Jim thinks he's made a Solomon-like decision and can't understand why the two waiters go off into the dining area with such looks of resentment on their faces.

Daedalus' has three hostesses working tonight. Greek restaurants are as patriarchal as Greece itself, and the job of the hostess is simply to seat people, keep their water glasses filled, and look as pretty as possible. Perhaps the prettiest is Chloe, who has been buttonholed by Tony, another one of the servers.

"I found this earring on the floor the other night," he tells her, "and I remembered you were wearing this kind. So, here it is."

"Oh, thank you!" she says. "I thought I'd lost it on the way home. Thank you!" But she's in a rush to get into the dining area, so that it's all she can do just to flash him a quick, but sincere, smile of gratitude as she backs into the exit door, and leaves the kitchen.

"Oooooh, she likes you." Katina, one of the cooks, has come up behind Tony. She is very short, with a small head, and her body is almost perfectly round, so that she looks like a large, ambulatory breast pointing up at the sky. She has an instinct for telling which staff member is attracted to which, and is forever trying to construct actual romances out of her hunches. "She is very nice girl," she tells Tony in her thick Greek accent. "I do not think she is with someone. Something to think about, hmmm?" Her "hmmm" rises in pitch until it turns into a chuckle just warm enough to avoid sounding dirty-minded.

Tony, however, does not know what to say. He thinks her question demands

a "dirty" quip in response, but is hamstrung by a combination of humorlessness, essential decency, and a fear of offending Katina. Furthermore, Katina is right. He doesn't know much about Chloe, but she always seems friendly and bright, and God knows she's attractive, so that yes, he would like to go out with her. At seventeen, he is the youngest member of the staff by three years, and still a virgin. And Greek! His awareness of his own virginity and his desire to erase it are so intense that he wants to aim every conversation he has with a girl towards the ultimate goal of having her sleep with him. Such cunningness and planning are beyond him, though, and he takes long, long pauses before he replies. Oh, and Chloe's earring was such a perfect set-up! And now to hear Katina tell him how available she is only deepens his sense of failure.

Tony goes into the dining area, pausing just outside the door as his eyes take in the room and adjust to the light. It is a large, square room whose white stuccoed walls can seem blindingly bright in the daytime, but which now, at night, seem oddly subdued, as if no light was entering the room for them to reflect. There are two distinct eating areas: a large one, nearest to the front window and the restaurant's entrance, where families and groups of four or five, as well as intimate groups of two, are seated; and a smaller area near the back of the restaurant, on a higher level, where all the larger groups are sent. A large, wooden chandelier hangs over the centre of the room. The plaster on the ceiling seems weakened and soaked through with water, especially around the chandelier's fixture, and Tony notices how the waiters avoid standing underneath it for any length of time, hurrying away from

under it as if from an implacable doom.

There is no camaraderie between any of the waiters: suddenly, the door jostles Tony from behind as Peter, another waiter, leaves the kitchen. Peter only mumbles "Watch it," in an annoyed, contemptuous voice, virtually under his breath, as he hurries past Tony and threads his way between the tables. As Peter heads towards the back of the restaurant, his foot accidentally kicks the leg of a customer's chair. The man, a balding, perpetually indignant type, wheels around in his seat, waves his knife and fork in tiny circles, and bellows at Peter: "Watch where you're going! You could have made me cut myself!" Tony gives a satisfied smile, as if he has been avenged.

Now, the taped music stops, and a new song begins playing over the speakers, even louder than the one before. Out comes Irene, the belly dancer. She does three performances a night, at six, eight, and ten o'clock, weaving through the restaurant, her midriff bare, her hands above her head, the miniature cymbals on her thumb and forefinger tinging in the air. She wears a filmy outfit, a diaphanous skirt and matching scarves, over a body stocking, and her hair is long and black and loose, with a gold-coloured band around the crown of her head. She is forty-one years old, Nick the owner's sister, and feels foolish. She was never a beauty, but now...She catches glimpses of her arms as she waves them in curvy patterns through the air. They have lost all their firmness, and quiver as if they had been packed with blancmange. Why haven't I kept in shape? she wonders to herself. But she knows why. She sure hadn't planning to be still belly dancing at her brother's restaurant

at forty-one years old. She'd started seven years ago, after another dancer quit and Nick had needed someone to fill in on short notice. Why not? She'd taken the lessons. She was going to be married in a few months, too, but that had fallen through after she'd caught the groom and her friend Emma in a back room during a New Year's Eve party, in the dark, pressed up against a wall like...like...well, like a pair of fish, she thought to herself. So flat against each other, and so shiny. She undulates past a young couple who have both ordered a large seafood platter, performs a few tired wriggles for the man, and moves on.

Nick had told her that this job would be a great way for her to meet men. After all, the whole point of belly dancing was to be a kind of strolling seductress. She would spin across the restaurant floor, her cymbals flashing, the bells on her ankles ringing. She would wave her bottom at the male customers, even the ones with dates, jiggling in front of them, cupping her breasts in her hands, and then raising her arms to the sky. But no one had ever asked after her once she was done. She would perform the most brazen flirtations she could think of, but none of the men seemed to think her attentions were directed specifically at <u>them</u>. The most they would do was applaud politely when she was done, and then go back to eating, without even considering so much as to tip her.

And yet, she had stayed. She is the type of person who waits for opportunities to present themselves to her instead of pursuing them herself, and no one has knocked on her door. She dances past a diner, a middle-aged man, who notices her near his table. He looks briefly up at his wife seated across the table,

cocks his head slightly toward Irene, and rolls his eyes in a condescending "Can you believe this?" expression. He doesn't think Irene has seen him, but she has. She dances back into the kitchen.

In the kitchen, everybody avoids Theo, the head cook. He is large, muscular, with thick, dark, curly hair and beard, and he is in one of his black moods again. No one knows what causes these moods, not even Theo. His own view is that he goes through a week-long period of bad temper every four or five weeks, almost as if he were having a period. But he has never expressed it this way to anyone else; he has been brought up to associate any sort of feminine characteristic with weakness, and he has no idea how to approach anyone and ask if men could have the troubles too. He avoids women for fear further girlish qualities will rub off on him. He is one of those men who cringe at being asked to hold women's purses in public; he avoids romantic movies; he stalks the Daedalus kitchen in a T-shirt, jeans and a pair of painter's overalls instead of an apron, his cleaver ringing off the countertop as he furiously chops up slab after slab of raw meat. In fact, he has become so afraid of showing an affinity for either sex that he is unfriendly to everybody, and most of the staff knows not to try talking to him outside of an emergency.

But Nate is a new employee, and doesn't know any better. He is a bright, enthusiastic kid who nevertheless hasn't an inkling of what other people's interests are, or how to make them like him. His obsessive joke for the night is the way that one of the Greek songs on the tape playing in the dining area sounds just like Noel Coward's "Mad About the Boy". He has begun the joke by asking everyone he runs

into in the kitchen if they agree with him--it's Noel Coward, isn't it? He has received only blank looks in reply, and now his joke is to ask everyone if he is the only person here who knows the song. He is, of course, but that doesn't make the observation any funnier. Nate deposits a dinner order with Theo, and tries to find a kindred spirit.

"Theo, you know who Noel Coward is, don't you?"

"What?"

"Noel Coward. You know, playwright, songwriter. Wit." He can't stop himself now. "Bon vivant. Raconteur."

Theo pauses. He gazes up at the young waiter, his eyes partially hidden by his thick brows, a look of annoyance and incredulity across his face. "Get the fuck out of my way."

Nate is honestly surprised. The song on the tape really does sound exactly like "Mad About the Boy". It was a very funny joke that he had made! he said to himself. He knows it isn't exactly a Top Ten hit anymore, but surely it isn't that obscure a tune, either. He listens to Noel Coward songs all the time--in fact, he was humming "World Weary" just as he arrived for work that day: "World weary, I'm world weary...I could kiss the railroad tracks...I want to get right back to nature, and relax." There must have been something about the melody that appealed to him, because the words certainly did not apply to him. Back to nature? he thinks. Where would that be? Greece? What would I do there? A whole nation of people like Theo telling me to go fuck myself. I might as well stay here! And then it occurs to

him that he's as lonely here as he would be halfway across the world. His stomach starts to hurt just as he takes a pair of salads from Katina, and re-enters the dining room. A man stops him.

"Hey, can you tell me where I can find the head?"

They are standing right underneath the speakers, and the crowd of diners is very noisy besides, so Nate thinks the man is asking for the head cook.

"He's in the kitchen, sir," he says brightly, "but customers aren't allowed back there. If you have any complaints, I'd be happy to give them to him."

Nate is so busy dreading having to relay a complaint to Theo that the customer's anger at him catches him completely off guard. He knows he's smart, and it always surprises him to discover how stupid he has actually been.

"The head, I said! The bathroom! Jesus, never mind, I'll find it myself..." And the man picks his way towards the back of the restaurant. Nate is very sorry to see that he is able to find the correct room so easily all by himself.

Later that evening, Chris comes into the kitchen with an anxious look on his face. He is carrying a single bowl of soup on a tray. Warily, he approaches Theo at the back of the kitchen.

"Theo?"

"Yeah, what is it?"

"Could I get another lemon chicken soup from you? There's a guy out there who doesn't like this bowl."

Theo gives the bowl a brief, murderous glance. "What's he say is wrong with it?"

"Well, he says it tastes a little tinny." Theo scowls. "You know, a little metallic."

Theo takes a sip from the bowl. "There's nothing wrong with this. Metallic! What is he tasting, the fucking pot it was made in?"

"I don't know, Theo," Chris says, humoring him. He agrees with Theo that the customer is crazy, but he knows that even agreeing with Theo can set off his temper. "Let's just make him happy and give him another bowl."

Theo grumbles something under his breath, but reaches for a new bowl anyway.

"Which guy was it who complained?" Peter asks from across the counter.

"He's sitting near the kitchen," Chris replies. "Short guy. You know, the complaining type."

"Is he bald?" asks Irene.

"Yeah," Chris says. "He's trying to cover it up, but yeah, he's bald. Why?"

"That must be the man who rolled his eyes when I was dancing," says Irene, suddenly angry. "He as much as snorted at me as I went by him. Every time!" The memory of the incident runs through her like a stream of cold water.

"Well then, that must be the guy who yelled at me for hitting his chair!" Peter's injury is much less than Irene's, but he feels it just as deeply as she.

At that moment, just before Theo hands the new bowl of soup over to Chris,

he does something completely unexpected. He parts his lips, forces his tongue behind the gap between his two front teeth, and spits into the soup. "There," he says. "See how fucking metallic that tastes."

For a moment, the kitchen is shocked. But then, Irene hurries over to Chris, who is too confused over whether he should serve the soup after all, or risk Theo's anger by requesting a third bowl. Irene leans over the soup, and spits sloppily into it, too. She wipes her lip with a look of triumph on her face, and says, "Spit on my dancing, will you?"

Chris still has not moved. "Well," Theo says to him. "Go ahead. Serve it." Theo's words seem to jostle Chris out of his confusion, and he nods and heads for the dining room. But Peter stops him.

"Wait, wait, Chris. Just a second." And Peter spits into the soup, too.

That opens the floodgates. One by one, the rest of the kitchen staff, the serving staff, the cleaning crew, all of them spit into the bowl of soup. Nate comes into the room, notices the commotion, and asks what is going on. "We're spitting into some guy's soup!" he is told gleefully, and instantly Nate realizes that the enemy must be the man with the bad temper who asked him where the bathroom was. Nate spits into the soup as well.

Heaven knows what ungrateful customers, disappointing lovers, or other symbols of discontent and unluck they are taking revenge on. But it is a shared enemy. For the first time in weeks they laugh with each other and seem to speak to and understand each other in a common language. They peer together through the

kitchen door as Chris brings the man his bowl of soup, and they all share a thrill of victory when he tells Chris that the dish is perfectly to his liking. The feuds and the rivalries between the staff members probably will not disappear, and people like Irene and Theo will probably stay boxed in for a long while yet. But for now, a cloud seems temporarily to have lifted.

The taped music stops one more time. Every night, the waiters are expected to lead the roomful of diners in a Greek line dance which will snake through the restaurant and out into the street. This part of the job has become a nightmare for the waiters over the last month or so--their enthusiasm level is so low that usually only a handful of the customers will join in the fun. And lately even the waiters have been forgetting the steps.

Tonight, Chris and Tony leap up, stand at the top of the stairs leading to the second level, hold up their arms for attention and call out, "Hey-a, hey-a, hey-a! We're going to do some Greek dancing tonight!" They make a universal gesture of friendship: they put their arms over each other's shoulders and slowly demonstrate the steps of the dance. "Who's for joining us now? Who's for a dance?" They circulate through the restaurant, pulling couples and families--even the complaining man--out of their chairs and up to the front of the room. Everybody links arms. Nate and Jim and Irene and Peter and Chloe join the line, too. Even Mike with his blister is ready to dance. Tony heads down the line with a wineskin filled with ouzo, squeezing out dark, licoricy mouthfuls for anybody who wants one. As soon as Nate gets his, he grits his teeth and shakes his head from side to side, as if he were an

animal tearing into a piece of flesh. "Is everybody ready?" cries out Chris. Everybody shouts that they are. The music begins, and all the customers start to dance. The song speeds up very quickly, and soon no one can move fast enough to keep up with it. They laugh and move their feet anyway, weaving through the dining room, and soon everybody has spilled out onto the sidewalk, and further, out into the street.

THE KEY TO VIOLET'S APARTMENT

Late last Wednesday morning, Violet woke up to the sound of traffic roaring below the open window of her bedroom. She was beautiful and alone, and had been having unusually whimsical dreams about herself being changed into a woodpecker. She had flitted about her neighbourhood, and the neighbourhood she had lived in when she was a child, going from tree to tree, and sucking out the sap and the teeming insects. Violet lived by herself, in an expansive apartment two blocks away from the one she had really wanted to move into when she arrived in town, but which she had acted too late on to acquire. Her room was almost high enough up

for her to see through one of that other apartment's many windows and look in at its occupants, who always had guests over. Everyone would gather around the grand piano while the man, the husband, played it with what looked like great finesse, and the woman, the wife, leaned against it, and sang. As Violet arose Wednesday morning, the morning she discovered that someone had crept up on her in the night and played a prank on her, she remembered that in her dream she had even flown to birch tree courtyards as far as two blocks away, and she had pecked the life out of them.

For brief moments in the mornings, Violet could look like an angel, because although she never wore dresses or skirts during the daytime, at night she always went to bed wearing a long white nightgown. When she brought her legs around to sit up on the side of the bed, there seemed to be satin flying and banking everywhere. Her nails were always short and painted red, and her hair was cut short and coloured with henna. During the day, she wore work shirts and pants, and she had her hair pulled back into a clip at the base of her neck. She wasn't giving anything away for free, she thought to herself, no one is getting any gifts from me. The only time someone had seen the nighttime side of her was when a friend of hers, a male friend named Brian, had come to her door unexpectedly early one morning. She'd borrowed a high-powered drill of his, and he needed it back. She answered the door, coming straight out of bed, with her nightgown and her satiny robe billowing around her. When she held the drill out for him, he looked at her all in satin, and said, thunderstruck, "Violet, you're a vision this morning."

Violet had a pair of satin slippers--ballet shoes, virtually--on the floor beside her bed, and it was when she slid her foot into the first of them on Wednesday morning that she realized something very wrong had taken place in her home during the night. There was water in her slipper--and she picked up the other one, and there was water in that one, too. They were full. She looked up, but there was no leak in the ceiling, and there was no water anywhere else on the floor. Water, and it was cold, had somehow found its way into each one of the satin slippers she wore every morning as she went about her morning business, moving from the bedroom to the bathroom changing back into her day self one more time.

She took the two slippers with her to the bathroom, cradling them gingerly so that none of the water sloshed out. She emptied them into the sink and looked at herself in the mirror. What had happened? she asked herself. There wasn't a drop of water to be found anywhere near her bed--had she been sleepwalking? Where had the water come from? She held the two damp slippers in her hand, and as she leaned against the sink she looked back at her bed, and at the window behind it. From out there, something told her. It was a beautiful morning outside, and there were thin white clouds and a blue sky, and tree after tree along the sidewalks.

Violet showered, and spent a full ten minutes drying herself before she stopped. She felt as though an aura of mystery had spread itself out into every room of her home, like a smoke. She hung her slippers onto a makeshift clothesline so that they would dry; they had darkened slightly where the water had seeped through.

Now, some of her friends said--not many, but a few--that to a certain extent

Violet had a mean spirit. She took small revenges for smaller slights, and she had something of a covetous soul, so that she often found herself mysteriously driven to pay people back. People liked her, and she herself was quite unaware of this side of herself, but when she spilled things on friends' papers, or caused catastrophes by mentioning indiscretions to the very people who were never meant to find out, her mind often went blank as a screen. In effect, she hid away from herself. She knew a man named Bradley once, and he knew she trusted him when she opened every door in her home for him one afternoon--she let him look into all of her closets, where all the brooms and the jars of fruit preserves were kept. She didn't often give out presents like that.

She had two closets in the front hallway, by the front door, and between them they contained about twelve pairs of shoes. After Violet got dressed and came in to look for a pair of them, she saw that each one of them had been filled with water as well. The shoes that had been thrown carelessly into the back at the end of a day had been put upright, arranged neatly with the others, and filled. Her boots had been braced with stiff cardboard so that they would stand up straight and hold water to their brims. Her running shoes and her high heels were filled as high as the cut of the shoe would allow. She owned no sandals. There was even a pair of moccasins she had left underneath her bed and nearly forgotten, but when she checked on them, she found they too had been filled with water. The light from the hallway shimmered on the water surface so that they looked like a pair of miniature ponds.

She was standing next to her front door, and she realized part of the mystery

was solved right there. Last night she'd undressed and gone to bed and turned out her lights, and never locked her door. The bolt hadn't even been turned, and as she looked at it, she could picture the knob turning in the dark, the moonlight playing across the dark, polished brass, and the door slowly gliding open.

Violet found a bucket underneath the sink in the kitchen, and she emptied the contents of her shoes into it. There was so much water, though, especially from those tall boots of hers, that she had to make two separate trips to get rid of it all, and as she walked down the hall, past all of her rooms, bent to one side by the weight of the bucket, she saw an expensive bracelet lying in full view on a table, and she realized that nothing she owned was missing. She checked inside her drawers, and all of her jewelry was still there. Not long ago, she had found $200 in a money clip on a park bench; she had put the windfall inside a small envelope and hid it inside a hatbox in her bedroom closet. She checked there, too, and it hadn't been taken either. The box hadn't even been opened. None of the doors to her closets or her cupboards were ajar, and none of their contents were at all out of place. Whoever had come into her home and crawled through the rooms for hours, for the better part of a night, hadn't disturbed a thing; he'd left everything just the way it was.

It could have been anyone, she said to herself, and she had an image of her entire apartment at night, with a swarm of mysterious people inside it, walking about in the dark with penlights waving, watering her plants and ladling out soup into all of her bowls. But it couldn't have been anyone, she realized, no common thief; he'd

taken nothing, he hadn't stolen a thing. He had remarkable self-control. And it occurred to her with a start that it must have been someone she knew. A friend, or someone she had met before. He had moved about her apartment silently, as if he knew it already. Some time ago, she had invited him in, maybe with a crowd of his friends, fed them and entertained them for an afternoon, and he had returned--what? a month, two months later?--in the middle of the night, and he'd tried to play a joke on her. But what was the joke?

She asked her neighbours if they had seen anyone going into or leaving her room late last night, but none of them had. She knew the visit could have taken place as early as one o'clock--the last waking moment she remembered was somewhere around twelve forty-five--and he could have left as late as ten-fifteen, since she woke up at ten-thirty. That was nine hours, more than a third of the day, but no one could give her a single clue. She called a few of her friends, the closest ones, and asked them if they knew anything about someone making plans to play a practical joke on her, or if in fact **they** were behind it themselves, but the calls turned up nothing. She knew better than to call in the police and try explaining to them what had happened. Two weeks ago, she recalled, she had got two men at work fired; she'd written an anonymous note that traced $2000 in missing funds to them. It was all true, and it cleared up a puzzling little mystery for the business, and Violet reasoned for a moment that it was they, they were the ones who wanted revenge and had broken into her home last night. She imagined the two of them, Gregory and Hal with those contented smiles she wished someone would take away from them,

working a hairpin inside her lock and then smiling because it was open already. But this wasn't revenge. And, furthermore, as Violet thought about all the parties she had thrown in the past, she remembered that neither tall, bearded Gregory nor small, handsome Hal had ever been inside her apartment before.

Violet was in a bad mood as her telephone rang the next morning. Her emotions were a mixture of frustration (from tossing and turning all night, half-afraid of falling asleep again), disappointment (from checking her shoes again and finding them dry) and confusion, not just over the mystery of her shoes but over her own frustration and disappointment as well.

The call was from Henry. He was one of the friends she had telephoned the day before. During that conversation, Henry had sounded puzzled at her questions. He had a talent at parties for singing old songs in a high falsetto, and there was a trace of that sound in his voice when he told her he had no knowledge, none at all, of anyone planning some sort of prank on her. But now, he said, he had something he wanted to tell her, and he arranged to meet her for lunch.

They sat in the corner of a restaurant, surrounded by potted rubber plants, and Henry told Violet that he had to make a confession to her. About three years ago, Violet had gone to Nova Scotia for two weeks to visit her parents, and she had asked Henry to house-sit for her. At the time, she owned a budgie that needed to be fed and looked after, a budgie that she had found perched on a bush in front of her building. It had escaped from its owners, and Violet had sneaked up on the bird

from behind and netted it in her coat. She ran upstairs with it while it beat its wings, shrieking, and she had left it underneath a cardboard box in a corner of the kitchen until a few days later when she bought it a cage. Henry's job was to feed the budgie, water her two African violets, and collect the mail and the newspapers accumulating by her door. She had given him a duplicate key to her apartment, and that was what he wanted to make his confession about.

It emerged that Henry had had a copy made of Violet's own duplicate key, one that he kept for himself. He had never used it himself, he said strenuously, but he had given it to a friend. The friend was named Edward, and all Violet knew of him was that he had red hair, and he was Henry's tennis partner. Henry, however, said that Edward was in love with her. Edward knew a florist named Murchison and with his help he was going to fill a room with roses, and leave a note for her at the bottom of the pile. Henry was supposed to notify Edward and Murchison when she had left for work so that they could drive the truck around back, and take in all the roses without Violet's knowing.

"Well, where are they, then?" Violet asked. "I've never gotten roses."

"He's gone," Henry explained. "I tried to convince him that he should stay, but I couldn't." Edward had left town two years earlier on a luxury airplane; he never even tried to meet Violet, and when Henry spoke to him for the last time, he didn't seem to be making any plans to come back. He had a new job set up, in Boston, and he wasn't going to be able to get away, nor did he have the inclination. Edward told Henry he'd fallen out of love with Violet somehow. It was like a kind

of hysteria, Edward explained, but it's passed. I couldn't get her out of my mind, but now...well, now I can. But, you know, I wish that I had known her; she's so beautiful, he said. I wish that we had been introduced properly; we might have been able to hit it off.

Violet stared at Henry in amazement. "You gave away my key," she said to him over and over. Henry kept apologizing, but Violet wouldn't have any of it. He knew Edward well, he said, it was entirely for you, but Violet shouted at him, and Henry wound up pointing toward the exit and ordering her away from his table.

Violet left the restaurant in a sort of daze; she wasn't sure if she should eliminate Edward from her list of suspects or not. Such elaborate plans, and how quickly and easily they had been called off. What could she have done to disenchant him? She thought of the $200 in her hatbox and she wondered, had Edward seen her do something not quite on the level? Was that what had spelt the difference? No, she couldn't take a thing out of Henry's story. It hadn't helped her at all as far as her mystery was concerned; Edward might have had a key to her door, but what difference did that make? The place was open--she had practically invited anyone who wished for it to come inside.

There was a woman named Mary who lived with Violet for the first month after Violet had moved into town, and the two of them had gotten into horrible fights. Hair had been pulled out, punches were thrown, and once, while they were renovating the kitchen, Violet went after her with that high-powered drill. Mary had eventually agreed to move out, and now, mysteriously, they'd become the best of

friends. Mary had left in the middle of the night after Violet had cut the telephone cord in two with a carving knife while Mary was talking to Bradley, and it looked like they would never meet again. But Mary came back to get the rest of her things and they were remarkably civil to each other. Soon after, a mutual friend of theirs named Beth had gotten married, and when Violet and Mary met each other at the ceremony, they cried to see each other after being separated for so long, and they got along like sisters. They never dared tempt fate again by moving back together, but they saw each other regularly, and told each other secrets while Mary, who used to work as a bartender, poured out the drinks.

Two days after Violet argued with Henry, she had another talk with Mary. Mary knew nothing about anyone planning on sneaking into Violet's home in the middle of the night, and she had said so when Violet had called her on Wednesday, but she did know something about Henry and his key to Violet's apartment. Mary knew a lot of things, though; she was a dark, stringy little woman who men could actually pick up and carry around, and she used to cry at everything: parades, commercials, greeting cards. When she and Violet fought, though, Mary would usually inflict more damage; nothing held her back, and once she wound up on Violet's back, pinning her to the ground, bending her arm around so that it had started quivering and was ready to break. She knew about secret conversations taking place in the dark and could piece together connections between people who pretended to be strangers meeting for the first time.

Anyway, Mary knew Henry, too; as far as she could tell, he had done nothing

wrong in his life, or at least nothing mean. When he was eight or nine, at Christmastime, he used to buy huge chocolate bars, wrap them up in paper, put them in strangers' mailboxes, ring their doorbells, and run away. He was still like that now, and he had exercised so much in the gym he had rigged up in his basement that his forearms were now like logs, and people expected kindness in him even less than when he was eight. He surprised everyone. But he had done a dumb thing, Mary told Violet that evening. Henry had confided his deepest secret to her one night after they had gone to see a very depressing play. "Henry didn't just make one copy of the key to your apartment," said Mary, leaning over the table, "he made dozens, and he used to give them away to his friends." She hastened to add, though, that Henry never told them whose door they opened; they were meant simply as gestures of friendship.

Mary's story was this:

Henry designed furniture for a living, and he met Violet when she saw him four years ago about making a cabinet for her, a big rosewood one for the bedroom. He was Brazilian--his family had come to Canada when he was seven years old--and when Violet started arguing with him about the price he insisted on charging, he became smitten. The louder she yelled, the more he fell under her spell. She had asked if he wanted to argue the figures over lunch that day, and Henry conceded on every point. He impulsively put aside prior commitments and deadlines so he could finish her cabinet by the end of the week; she checked in on his progress regularly, and he always looked forward to when she'd come by his shop and walk over to his

corner. Then he could make plans with her once again--where should they eat? He delivered the cabinet to her apartment, and when he set it down where she wanted, he tried to hold her hand, but she said "No" to him in a soft, secure voice as soon as they touched. All right then, he thought, all right. They saw each other often, though, even after he'd finished the work, and Henry came to feel that they had a special rapport, a secret connection that informed everything they had ever said to each other. When she asked him to look after her apartment while she went out to the coast to visit her parents, Henry took her key down to his workshop, to make a copy of it, just as a precaution, but he found he was unable to stop.

Mary told her all about this, and more. After the story about Henry, Violet mentioned softly how it bowled her over, how astonished she was to find that Henry had had a crush on her, and might, after everything that had happened, have one yet. But Mary said it didn't end there, and she reeled off an entire litany of names of people who had felt the same about her over the past six months alone. Violet had known about Bradley and Brian, of course, but there was Norman too, and Joseph, and a second Edward, and a teenaged boy named Gordie, and Albert. Albert! And all along she had thought he was infatuated with their old friend Beth. Mary said that Danny had been in love with her, and Lionel, and Marty, and Steve, and a boisterous lesbian sculptor the two of them had known named Sandra. (Months later, Violet found herself asking Sandra if it was true, and Sandra only laughed resignedly, and said, "Yes, that would be me.")

When Violet got home that night, she thought about how, on one hand, she

had lost so many things in the past few days. When she left the building one morning, a button on her sleeve had snagged on a railing; she felt a tug on the fabric, and then the button was gone. She had lost the $200 she'd found in the money clip, too--she had put it into an envelope before she went to the restaurant with Henry, and she had it with her when she got up to leave, but by the time she was back home, even though she hadn't stopped anywhere, she could feel inside her pocket and realize it was missing. Edward was lost two years ago, but she only knew about it today. But on the other hand, there were presents she'd received, as well. In the restaurant, she'd ordered an unfamiliar dessert, and then had seen the same dish delivered to a nearby table. That one looked small, but the one she received had extra cream on the top and more of the custardy filling the menu had promised inside. And it was possible to see all the water she'd found that morning as a strange gift as well.

Who had given it, though? Was it Brian, her friend with the drill? It could have been, she thought, although she really suspected Henry, the obvious one, above everyone else. That night, she had an insight. She dreamed that Henry had come to her doorway at three o'clock in the evening. He had one of his many keys in his hand, and when he slipped it into the lock, the door opened automatically. He dropped down to the floor, and Violet could see him now, she could see him right there. Violet decided then that she could love him, that he, out of all the suspects, was the culprit from the start. She watched as he opened the closet door to the right of him and poured water into all of her shoes. He had a canteen strapped to his

back, but that wouldn't have held enough, Violet said to herself with alarm, where was he going to get the rest? And then she saw he had three, four canteens that he had brought along with him. He loved her so much he needed four canteens to finish the job.